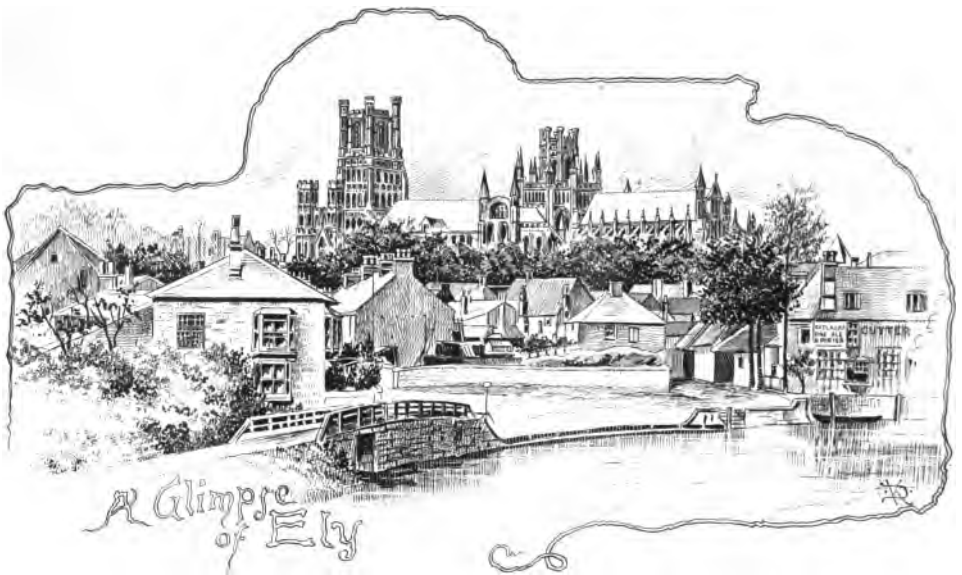
Cheap Jack Zita

— Illustrated —

Baring-Gould.

11 Fiction, Pop Lit

Boring


A Glimpse of Ely

In front of the cathedral, before the Galilee, —the magnificent west porch of the minster of St. Etheldreda,—a Cheap Jack's van was drawn up.

Within twenty yards of the Bishop's palace, where every word uttered was audible in every room, a Cheap Jack was offering his wares.

Effrontery was, in heraldic language, rampant and regardant.

A crowd was collected about the van; a crowd composed of all sorts and conditions of men, jostling each other, trampling on the grass of the lawn, climbing up the carved work of the cathedral, to hear, to see, to bid, to buy.

Divine service was hardly over. The organ was still mumbling and tooting, when through the west door came a drift of choristers, who had flung off their surplices and had raced down the nave, that they might bid against and outbid each other for the pocket-knives offered by Cheap Jack.

Mr. Faggs, the beadle, was striding in the same direction, relaxing the muscles of his face from the look of severe ecclesiastical solemnity into which they were drawn during divine worship. It had occurred to him during the singing of the anthem that there were sundry articles of domestic utility Cheap Jack was selling that it might be well for him to secure at a low figure.

Mr. Bowles, the chief bailiff, had come forth from evensong with his soul lifted up with thankfulness that he was not as other men were: he attended the cathedral daily, he subscribed to all the charities; and now he stood looking on, his breath taken away, his feet riveted to the soil by surprise at the audacity of the Cheap Jack, in daring to draw up before the minster, and vend his wares during the hour of afternoon prayer.

The servant maids in the canons' houses in the Close had their heads craned out from such narrow Gothic windows as would allow their brachycephalic skulls to pass, and were listening and lawk-a-mussying and oh-mying over the bargains.

Nay, the Bishop himself was in an upper room, the window-sash of which was raised, ensconced behind the curtain, with his ear open and cocked, and he was laughing at what he heard till his apron rippled, his bald head waxed pink, and his calves quivered.

Very little of the sides of the van was visible, so encrusted were they with brooms, brushes, door-mats, tin goods, and coalscuttles. Between these articles might be detected the glimmer of the brimstone yellow of the carcase of the shop on wheels. The front of the conveyance was open; it was festooned with crimson plush curtains, drawn back; and, deep in its depths could be discerned racks and ranges of shelves,

stored with goods of the most various and inviting description.

The front of the van was so contrived as to fall forward, and in so falling to disengage a pair of supports that sustained it, and temporarily converted it into a platform. On this platform stood the Cheap Jack, a gaunt man with bushy dark hair and sunken cheeks; he was speaking with a voice rendered hoarse by bellowing. He was closely shaven. He wore drab breeches and white stockings, a waistcoat figured with flowers, and was in his shirt sleeves. On his head was a plush cap, with flaps that could be turned up or down as occasion served. When turned down, that in front was converted into a peak that sheltered his eyes, those at the sides protected his ears, and that behind prevented rain from coursing down the nape of his neck. When, however, these four lappets were turned up, they transformed the cap into a crown—a crown such as it behoved the King of Cheap Jacks to wear. The man was pale and sallow, sweat-drops stood on his brow, and it was with an effort that he maintained the humour with which he engaged the attention of his hearers, and that he made his voice audible to those in the outermost ring of the curious and interested clustered about the van. Within, in the shadowed depths of the conveyance, glimpses were obtained of a girl, who moved about rapidly and came forward occasionally to hand the Cheap Jack such articles

as he demanded, or to receive from him such as had failed to command a purchaser.

When she appeared, it was seen that she was a slender, well-built girl of about seventeen summers, with ripe olive skin, a thick head of short-cut chestnut hair, and a pair of hazel eyes.

Apparently she was unmoved by her father's jokes; they provoked no smile on her lips, for they were familiar to her; and she was equally unmoved by the admiration she aroused among the youths, with which also she was apparently familiar.

'Here now!' shouted the Cheap Jack. 'What the dickens have I got?—a spy-glass to be sure, and such a spy-glass as never was and never will be offered again. When I was a-comin' along the road from Cambridge, and was five miles off, "Tear and ages!" sez I, seein' your famous cathedral standin' up in the sunshine, "Tear and ages!" sez I; "that's a wonder of the world." And I up wi' my spy-glass. Now look here. You observe as 'ow one of the western wings be fallen down. 'Tis told that when the old men built up that there top storey to the tower, that it throwed the left wing down. Now I looked through this perspective glass, and I seed both wings standing just as they used to be, and just as they ought to be, but ain't. I couldn't take less than seventeen and six for this here wonderful spy-glass—seventeen and six. What! not buy

a glass as will show you how things ought to be, but ain't?' He turned to the circle round him from side to side. 'Come now,—say ten shillings. 'Tis a shame to take the perspective glass out of Ely.' A pause. 'No one inclined to bid ten shillings? Take it back, Zita. These here Ely folk be that poor they can't go above tenpence. Ten shillings soars above their purses. But stay. Zita, give me that there glass again. There is something more that is wonderful about it. You look through and you'll see what's to your advantage, and that's what every one don't see wi' the naked eye. Come—say seven shillings!'

No bid.

'And let me tell the ladies—they've but to look through, and they'll see the *him* they've set their 'arts on, comin', comin',—bloomin' as a rose, and 'olding the wedding ring in 'is 'and.'

In went the heads of the servant maids of the canons' residences.

'I say!' shouted one of the choristers, 'will it show us a coming spanking?'

'Of course it will,' answered the Cheap Jack, 'because it's to your advantage.'

'Let us look then.'

Cheap Jack handed the telescope to the lad. He put his eye to it, drew the glass out, lowered it, and shouted, 'I see nothing.'

'Of course not. You're such a darlin' good boy; you ain't going to have no spanking.'

'Let me look,' said a shop-girl standing by.

Cheap Jack waited. Every one watched.

'I don't see nothing,' said the girl.

'Of course not. You ain't got a sweetheart, and never will have one.'

A roar of laughter, and the young woman retired in confusion.

'And, I say,' observed the boy, as he returned the glass, 'it's all a cram about the fallen transept. I looked, and saw it was down.'

'Of course you did,' retorted the Cheap Jack. 'Didn't I say five miles off? Go five miles along the Wisbeach Road, and you'll see it sure enough, as I said. There—five shillings for it.'

'I'll give you half a crown.'

'Half a crown!' jeered the vendor. 'There, though, you're a quirister, and for the sake o' your beautiful voice, and because you're such a good boy, as don't deserve nor expect a whacking, you shall have it for half a crown.'

The Bishop's nose and one eye were thrust from behind the curtain.

'Why,' said the Right Reverend to himself, 'that's Tom Bulk, as mischievous a young rogue as there is in the choir and grammar school. He is as sure of a caning this week as —as'—

'Thanky, sir,' said Cheap Jack, pocketing the half-crown. 'Zita, what next? Hand me that blazin' crimson plush weskit.'

From out the dark interior stepped the girl, and the sunshine flashed over her, lighting her auburn hair, rich as burnished copper. She wore a green, scarlet, and yellow flowered kerchief, tied across her bosom, and knotted behind her back. Bound round her waist was a white apron.

She deigned no glance at the throng, but kept her eyes fixed on her father's face.

'Are you better, dad?' she asked in a low tone.

'Not much, Zit. But I'll go through with it.'

'Here we are now!' shouted the Jack, after he had drawn the sleeve of his left arm across his brow and lips, that were bathed in perspiration. And yet the weather was cold; the season was the end of October, and the occasion of the visit of the van to Ely was Tawdry (St. Etheldreda's) Fair.

A whisper and nudges passed among the young men crowded about the van.

'Ain't she just a stunner?'

'I say, I wish the Cheap Jack would put up the girl to sale. Wouldn't there be bidding?'

'She's the finest thing about the caravan.'

Such were comments that flew from one to another.

'Now, then!' bellowed the vendor of cheap wares; 'here you are again! A red velvet weskit, with splendid gold—real gold—buttons. You shall judge; I'll put it on.'

The man suited the action to the word. Then he straightened his legs and arms, and turned himself about from side to side to exhibit the full beauty of the vestment from every quarter.

'Did you ever see the like of this?' he shouted. 'But them breeches o' mine have a sort o' deadening effect on the beauty of the weskit. Thirty shillings is the price. You should see it along with a black frock-coat and black trousers. Then it's glorious! It's something you can wear with just what you likes. No one looks at rags when you've this on, so took up is they with the weskit. What is that you said, sir? Twenty-five shillings was your offer? It is yours—and all because I sees it'll go with them great black whiskers of yours like duck and green peas. It'll have a sort of a mellering effect on their bushiness, and 'armonise with them as well as the orging goes wi' the chanting of the quiristers.'

Jack handed the waistcoat, which he had hastily plucked off his back, to one of the lay-clerks of the cathedral. The man turned as red as the waistcoat, and thrust his hands behind his back.

'I never bid for it,' he protested.

'Beg pardon, sir; I thought you nodded your 'ead to me, but it was the wind a-blowin' of it about. That gentleman with the black flowin' whiskers don't take the weskit; it is still for sale. I'll let you have it for fifteen shillings,

and it'll make you a conquering hero among the females. You, sir? Here you are.'

He addressed the chief bailiff, Mr. Bowles, an elderly, white-whiskered, semi-clerical official, the pink and paragon of propriety.

'No!' exclaimed Cheap Jack, as Mr. Bowles, with uplifted palms and averted head, staggered back. 'No—his day is past. But I can see by the twinkle of his eye he was the devil among the gals twenty years ago. It's the young chaps who must compete for the weskit. I'll tell you something rare,' continued the man, after clearing his throat and mopping his brow and lips. 'No one will think but what you're a lord or a harchbishop when you 'ave this 'ere weskit on. As I was a-coming into Ely in this here concern, sez I to myself, "I'll put on an appearance out o' respect to this ancient and venerable city." So I drawed on this weskit; and what should 'appen but we meets his most solemn and sacred lordship, the Bishop of the diocese.'

'This is coming it rather strong,' said the person alluded to behind the curtain, and his face and head became hot and damp.

'Well, and when his lordship, the Right Reverend, saw me, he lifted up his holy eyes and looked at my weskit. And then sez he to himself, "Lawk-a-biddy, it's the Prince!" and down he went in the dirt afore me, grovellin' with his nose in the mire. He did, upon my word.'

'Upon my word, this is monstrous! this is insufferable! A joke is a joke!' gasped the Bishop, very much agitated. 'There's moderation in all things—a limitation to be observed even in exaggeration. I haven't been on the Wisbeach Road this fortnight. I never saw the man. I never went down in the dirt. This is positively appalling!'

He took a turn round the room, went to the bell, then considered that it would be inadvisable to summon the footman and show that he had been listening to the nonsense of a Cheap Jack. Accordingly he went back to the window, hid himself once more behind the curtain, but so trembled with excitement and distress, that the whole curtain trembled with him.

'Nine and six. Here you are. Nine and six for this splendid garment, and cheap it is—dirt cheap. You're a lucky man, sir; and won't you only cut out your rivals with the darling?'

Cheap Jack handed the plush waistcoat to a young farmer from the Fens; then suddenly he turned himself about, looked into his van, and said in a husky voice—

'Zit, I can't go yarning no longer. I've got to the end of my powers; you carry on.'

'Right, father; I'm the boy for you with the general public.'

The man stepped within. As he did so, the girl lowered one of the curtains so as to conceal him. He sank wearily on a bench at the side.

She stooped with a quivering lip and filling eye and kissed him, then sprang forward and stood outside on the platform, contemplating the crowd with a look of assurance, mingled with contempt.

CHAPTER II.

THE FLAILS.

'NOW, here's a chance you may never have again—a chance, let me tell you, you never *will* have again.' She extended in both hands packages of tea done up in silvered paper. 'The general public gets cheated in tea—it does—tremenjous! It is given sloe leaves, all kinds of rubbish, and pays for it a fancy price. Father, he has gone and bought a plantation out in China, and has set over it a real mandarin with nine tails, and father guarantees that this tea is the very best of our plantation teas, and he sells it at a price which puts it within the reach of all. Look here!' she turned a parcel about; 'here you are, with the mandarin's own seal upon it, to let every one know it is genuine, and that it is the only genuine tea sent over.'

'Where's the plantation, eh, girl?' jeered a boy from the grammar school.

'Where is it?' answered the girl, turning sharply on her interlocutor. 'It's at Fumchoo,

Do you know where Fumchoo is? You don't? and yet you sets up to be a scholar. It is fifteen miles from Pekin by the high road, and seven and a half over the fields. Go to school and look at your map, and tell your master he ought to be ashamed of himself not to ha' made you know your geography better. Now, then, here's your chance. Finest orange-flower Pekoe at four shillings. Beat that if you can.' No offers. 'I am not coming down in my price. Don't think that; not a farthing. Four shillings a pound; but I'll try to meet you in another way. I keep the tea in quarter-pound parcels as well. Perhaps that'll meet your views—and a beautiful pictur' of Fumchoo on the cover, with the Chinamen a-picking of the tea leaves. What! no bidder?'

There ensued a pause. Every one expected that the girl would lower the price. They were mistaken. She went back into the van and produced a roll of calico. Then ensued an outcry of many voices: 'Tea! give us some of your tea, please.' In ten minutes she had disposed of all she had.

'There, you see,' said Zita, 'our supply runs short. In Wisbeach the Mayor and Corporation bought it, and at Cambridge all the colleges had their supplies from us. That's why we're run out now. Stand back, gents.'

This call was one of caution to the eager purchasers and tempted lookers-on.

Tawdry Fair was for horses and bullocks, and a drove of the latter was being sent along from the market-place towards Stuntney. For a while the business of the sale was interrupted. One audacious bullock even bounded into the Galilee, another careered round the van; one ran as if for sanctuary to the Bishop's palace. Zita seized the occasion to slip inside the van. Her father was on the low seat, leaning his head wearily on his hand, and his elbow on his knee.

'How are you now, dad?'

'I be bad, Zit—bad—tremenjous.'

'Had you not best see a doctor?'

He shook his head.

'It'll pass,' said he; 'I reckon doctors won't do much for me. They're over much like us Cheap Jacks—all talk and trash.'

'This has been coming on some time,' observed the girl gravely. 'I've seen for a fortnight you have been poorly.'

Then, looking forth between the curtains which she had lowered, she saw that the bullocks were gone, and that the cluster of people interested in purchases had re-formed round her little stage.

'I say,' shouted a chorister, 'have you got any pocket-knives?'

'Pocket-knives by the score, and razors too. You'll be wanting a pair of them in a fortnight.'

Whilst Zita was engaged in furnishing the lads with knives, the Bishop retired from the

upstairs window to his library, where he seated himself in an easy-chair, took up a pamphlet, and went up like a balloon inflated with elastic gas into theologic clouds, where controversy flashed and thundered about his head, and in this, his favourite sphere, the Right Reverend Father forgot all about the Cheap Jack, and no longer felt concern at his having been misrepresented as grovelling before a prince of the blood royal in a red waistcoat.

At the same time, also, a plot concerning Zita was being entered into by a number of young fenmen who had come to Tawdry Fair to amuse themselves, and had been arrested by the attractions of the Cheap Jack's van.

Whatever those attractions might have been whilst the man was salesman, they were enhanced tenfold when his place was occupied by his daughter. Some whispering had gone on for five minutes, and then with one consent they began to elbow their way forward till they had formed an innermost ring around the platform. But this centripetal movement had not been executed without difficulty and protest. Women, boys, burly men were forced to give way before the wedge-like thrusts inwards of the young men's shoulders, and they remonstrated, the women shrilly, the boys by shouts, the men with oaths and blows. But every sort of resistance was overcome, all remonstrances of whatever sort were disregarded, and Zita

suddenly found herself surrounded by a circle of sturdy, tall fellows, looking up with faces expressive of mischief.

That something more than eagerness to purchase was at the bottom of this movement struck Zita, and for a moment she lost confidence, and faltered in her address on the excellence of some moth-eaten cloth she was endeavouring to sell.

Then one round-faced, apple-complexioned young man worked himself up by the wheel of the van, and, planting his elbows on the platform, shouted, 'Come, my lass, at what price do you sell kisses?'

'We ha'n't got them in the general stock,' answered Zita; 'but I'll ask father if he'll give you one.'

A burst of laughter.

'No, no,' shouted the red-faced youth, getting one knee on the stage. 'I'll pay you sixpence for a kiss—slick off your cherry lips.'

'I don't sell.'

'Then I'll have one as a gift.'

'I never give away nothing.'

'Then I'll steal one.'

The young fellow jumped to his feet on the platform. At the signal the rest of the youths began to scramble up, and in a minute the place was invaded, occupied, and the girl surrounded. Cheers and roars of laughter rose from the spectators.

'Now, then, you Cheap Jack girl,' exclaimed the apple-faced youth. 'Kisses all round, three a-piece, or we'll play Old Harry with the shop, and help ourselves to its contents.'

The father of Zita, on hearing the uproar, the threats, the tramp of boots on the stage, staggered to his feet, and, drawing back the curtains, stood holding them apart, and looking forth with bewildered eyes. Zita turned and saw him.

'Sit down, father,' said she. 'It's only the general public on a frolic.'

She put her hand within and drew forth a stout ashen flail, whirled it about her head, and at once, like grasshoppers, the youths leaped from the stage, each fearing lest the flapper should fall on and cut open his own pate. The last to spring was the apple-faced youth; he was endeavouring to find some free space into which to descend, when the flapper of the flail came athwart his shoulder-blades with so sharp a stroke, that, uttering a howl, he plunged among the throng, and would have knocked down two or three, had they not been wedged together too closely to be upset.

Then ensued cries from those hurt by his weight as he floundered upon them; cries of 'Now, then, what do you mean by this? Can't you keep to yourself? This comes of your nonsense.'

Zita stood erect, leaning on the staff of the

"I haven't a pair," said the girl.—p. 19.

flail, looking calmly round on the confusion, waiting till the uproar ceased, that she might resume business. As she thus stood, her eye rested on a tall, well-shaped man, with a tiger's skin cast over his broad shoulders, and with a black felt slouched hat on his head. His nose was like the beak of a hawk. His eyes were dark, piercing, and singularly close together, under brows that met in one straight band across his forehead.

The moment this man's eye caught that of Zita, he raised his great hat, flourished it in the air, exposing a shaggy head with long dark locks, and he shouted, 'Well done, girl! I like that. Give me a pair of them there ashen flails, and here's a crown for your pluck.'

'I haven't a pair,' said the girl.

'Then I'll have that one, with which a little gal of sixteen has licked our Fen louts. I like that.'

'I'll give you a crown for that flail,' called another man, from the farther side of the crowd. 'Here you are—a crown.'

This man was fair, with light whiskers—a tall man as well as the other, and about the same age.

'I'll give you seven shillings and six—a crown and half a crown for that flail,' roared the dark man. 'I bid first—I want that flail.'

'Two crowns—ten shillings,' called the fair man. 'I can make a better offer than Drown-

lands—not as I want the flail, but as Drownlands wants it, he shan't have it.'

'Twelve and six,' roared the dark man. 'Gold's no object with me. What I wants I will have.'

The lookers-on nudged each other. A young farmer said to his fellow, 'Them chaps, Runham and Drownlands, be like two tigers; when they meet they must fight. We shall have fun.'

'You are a fool!' shouted the fair man,—'a fool—that is what I think you are, to give twelve and six for what isn't worth two shillings. I'll let you have it at that price, that you may become the laughing-stock of the Fens.'

The flail was handed out of the van to the man called Drownlands, Zita received a piece of gold and half a crown in her palm. She retired into the waggon, and immediately reappeared with a second flail.

'Here is another, after all,' said she; 'I didn't think I had it.'

'I'll take that to make the pair,' said Drownlands; 'but as you've done me over the first, I think you should give me this one.'

'I done you!' exclaimed Zita; 'you've done yourself.'

'She's right there,' observed a man in the crowd. 'Them tigers—Runham and Drownlands—would fight about a straw.'

'Are you going to hand me over that flail?' asked the dark purchaser.

Zita remained for a moment undecided. She had in verity made an unprecedented price with the first, and she was half inclined to surrender the second gratis, but to give and receive nothing was against the moral code of Cheap Jacks from the beginning of Cheap Jacking. Whilst she hesitated, holding the flail in suspense, and with a finger on her lips, the fair man yelled out—

'Don't let the blackguard have it. I'll have it to spoil the pair for him, and for no other reason.'

'I will have it, you scoundrel!' howled the dark man. 'I have as much gold as ever you have. I don't care what I spend. Here, girl! a crown to begin with.'

'Seven and six,' shouted Runham.

'Ten shillings,' cried Drownlands.

'Fifteen shillings!' exclaimed the fair man. Then, seeing that his rival was about to bid, he yelled, 'A guinea!' at the same moment that the other called, 'A pound!'

'It is yours,' said the girl to the man Runham, and she handed him the flail. She saw that the passions of the two men were roused, and she deemed it desirable to close the scene, lest a fight should ensue, in which, possibly, she might lose the money that had been offered.

Runham, flourishing his flail over his head, and throwing out the flapper in the direction of Drownlands, said, 'There, now! Who can

say but what I'm the best off of the two? Mine cost me a guinea, and his beggarly flail not above twelve and six. I am the better man of the two by eight and six.'

He felt in his pockets and drew forth a guinea.

'There, you Cheap Jack girl—here's your money all in gold. I'm the better man of the two by eight and six. I've beat Drownlands like a gentleman.'

Some one looking on in the crowd said, 'A pair o' flails and a pair o' fools at the end o' them, as don't know what is the vally o' their money. Never since the creation of the world was flails sold at that price, and never will be again.'

'And never would have been, or never could have been, anywhere but among fen-tigers,' said another.

'I'll tell'y what,' observed the first; 'this ain't the end o' the story.'

'No—I guess not. It's the beginnin' rather of a mighty queer tale.

CHAPTER III.

TWO CROWNS.

A STRANGELY interesting city is Ely. Unique in its way is the metropolis of the Fens; wonderful exceeding it must have been in the olden times when the fen-land was one great inland sea, studded at wide intervals with islets as satellites about the great central isle of Ely. It was a scene that impressed the imagination of our forefathers. Stately is the situation of Durham, that occupies a tongue of land between ravines. It has its own unique and royal splendour. But hardly if at all inferior, though very different, is the situation of Ely. The fens extend on all sides to the horizon, flat as the sea, and below the sea level. If the dykes were broken through, or the steam pumps and windmills ceased to work, all would again, in a twelvemonth, revert to its primitive condition of a vast inland sea, out of which would rise the marl island of Ely, covered with buildings amidst tufted trees, reflecting them-

selves in the still water as in a glass. Above the roofs, above the tree-tops, soars that glorious cathedral, one of the very noblest, certainly one of the most beautiful, in England—nay, let it be spoken boldly—in the whole Christian world. It stands as a beacon seen from all parts of the Fens, and it is the pride of the Fens.

Ely owes its origin to a woman—St. Etheldreda—flying from a rude, dissolute, and drunken court. She was the wife first of Tombert, a Saxon prince in East Anglia, then of Egfrid of Northumbria. Sick of the coarse revelry, the rude manners of a Saxon court, Etheldreda fled and hid herself in the isle of Ely, where she would be away from men and alone with God and wild, beautiful nature.

Whatever we may think of the morality of a wife deserting her post at the side of her husband, of a queen abandoning her position in a kingdom, we cannot, perhaps, be surprised at it. A tender, gentle-spirited woman after a while sickened of the brutality of the ways of a Saxon court, its drunkenness and savagery, and fled that she might find in solitude that rest for her weary soul and overstrained nerves she could not find in the Northumbrian palace. This was in the year 673. Then this islet was unoccupied. It has been supposed that it takes its name from the eels that abounded round it; we are, perhaps, more correct in surmising that it was originally called the Elf-isle, the islet

inhabited by the mythic spiritual beings who danced in the moonlight and sported over the waters of the meres.

This lovely island, covered with woods, surrounded by a fringe of water-lilies, gold and silver, floating far out as a lace about it, became the seat of a great monastery. Monks succeeded the elves.

King Canute, the Dane, was seized with admiration for Ely, loved to visit it in his barge, or come to it over the ice. It is said that one Candlemas Day, when, as was his wont, King Canute came towards Ely, he found the meres overflowed and frozen. A 'ceorl' named Brithmer led the way for Canute's sledge over the ice, proving the thickness of the ice by his own weight. For this service his lands were enfranchised.

On another occasion the king passed the isle in his barge, and over the still and glassy water came the strains of the singing in the minster. Whereupon the king composed a song, of which only the first stanza has been preserved, that may be modernised thus:—

> 'Merry sang the monks of Ely
> As King Knut came rowing by.
> Oarsmen, row the land more near
> That I may hear their song more clear.'

Ely, although it be a city, is yet but a village. The houses are few, seven thousand inhabitants is the population, it has two or three parish

churches, and the cathedral, the longest in Christendom. The houses are of brick or of plaster; and a curious custom exists in Ely of encrusting the plaster with broken glass, so that a house-front sparkles in the sun as though frosted. All the roofs are tiled. The cathedral is constructed of stone quarried in Northamptonshire, and brought in barges to the isle.

Ely possesses no manufactures, has almost no neighbourhood, stands solitary and self-contained. On some sides it rises rapidly from the fen, on others it slopes easily down. A singular effect is produced when the white mists hang over the fen-land for miles and miles, and the sun glitters on the island city. Then it is as an enchanted isle of eternal spring, lost in a wilderness of level snow. Or again, on a night when the auroral lights flicker over the heavens, here red, there silvery, and against the glowing skies towers up this isle crowned with its mighty cathedral, then, verily, it is as though it were a scene in some fairy tale, some magic creation of Eastern fantasy.

A girl was sauntering through the wide, grass-grown streets of Ely. During the fair the streets were full of people—nay, full is not the word—were occupied by people more or less scattered about them. It would take a vast throng, such as the fens of Cambridgeshire cannot supply, to *fill* these wide spaces.

The girl was tall and handsome, rather mas-

culine, with a cheerful face. She had very fair hair, a bright complexion, and eyes of a dazzling blue—a blue as of the sea when rippling and sparkling in the midsummer sun. She was plainly dressed in serge of dark navy blue, with white kerchief about her neck, a chip hat-bonnet and blue ribbons in it. Her skirts were somewhat short, they exposed neat ankles in stockings white as snow, and strong shoes. A fen-girl must wear strong shoes, she cannot have gloves on her feet.

'Jimminy!' said the girl, as she turned her pocket inside out. 'Not one penny! Poor Kainie is the only girl at the fair without a sweetheart, the only child without a fairing. No one to treat me! Nothing to be got for nothing. Jimminy! I don't care.' Then she began to sing:—

'Last night the dogs did bark,
I went to the gate to see.
When every lass had her spark,
But nobody comes to me.
And it's Oh dear! what will become of me?
Oh dear, what shall I do?
Nobody coming to marry me,
Nobody coming to woo.

My father's a hedger and ditcher,
My mother does nothing but spin,
And I am a pretty young girl,
But the money comes slowly in'—

Then suddenly she confronted the fair-haired farmer Runham, coming out of a tavern, with

the flail over his shoulder. A little disconcerted at encountering him, she paused in her song, but soon recovered herself, and began again at the interrupted verse:—

> 'My father's a hedger and ditcher,
> My mother'—

'Kainie! Are you beside yourself, singing like a ballad-monger in the open street?'

The man's face was red, whether with drink, or that the sight of the girl had brought the colour into his face, Kainie could not say. His breath smelt of spirits, and she turned her head away.

'It's all nonsense,' she said. 'My mother is dead—is dead—and I am alone. I don't know, I don't see why I should not sing; I want a fairing, and have no money. I'll go along singing, "My father's a hedger and ditcher," and then some charitable folk will throw me coppers, and I shall get a little money and buy myself a fairing.'

'For heaven's sake, do nothing of the kind. Here—rather than that—here is a crown. Take that. What would the Commissioners say if they were told that you went a ballad-singing in the streets of Ely at Tawdry Fair? They would turn you out of your mill. I am sure they would. Here, Kainie, conduct yourself respectably, and take a crown.'

He pressed the large silver coin into her hand, and hurried away.

'That's brave!' exclaimed the girl, snapping her fingers. 'Now I can buy my fairing. Now, all I want is a lover.

"Nobody coming to marry me,
Nobody coming to woo!"

Jimminy! I must not do that! I've taken a crown to be mum. Now I'm a young person of respectability—I've money in my pocket. Now I must look about me and see what to buy. I'll go to the Cheap Jack. How do you do, uncle?'

She addressed the dark-haired man Drownlands, who had just turned the corner, with his flail over his shoulder. He scowled at the girl, and would have passed her without a word, but to this she would not consent.

'See! see!' said she, holding up the crown she had received. 'I was just going along sighing and weeping because I had no money, not a farthing in my pocket, not a lover at my side to buy me anything. Then came some one and gave me this—look, Uncle Drownlands! Five shillings!'

'So—going in bad ways?'

'What is the harm? I was ballad-singing. Then he came and gave me a crown.'

'You ballad-singing!'

'Yes; how else can I get money? I'm a poor girl, owned by nobody, for whom nobody cares.'

'You will bring disgrace—deeper disgrace on the family—on the name.'

'Not I; I'm honest. If I am given five shillings, may I not receive it? Master Runham gave me the money to make me shut my mouth. I was singing

> "My father's a hedger and ditcher,
> My mother"'—

'For heaven's sake, silence!' said Drownlands angrily. 'If you will hold your tongue, I will give you a couple of shillings.'

'A couple of shillings! And I'm your own niece, and have your name.'

'More shame to you—to your mother!' exclaimed the farmer bitterly.

The girl suddenly dropped her head, and her brow became crimson.

'Not a word about my dear mother—not a stone thrown at her,' she said in a low tone.

'Well, no ballad-singing. Take heed to yourself. You are wild and careless.'

'Much you think of me! much you care for me!'

'Begone! You are a disgrace to me—your existence is a disgrace. Take a crown and spend it properly. You shall have nothing more from me. As Runham gave you five shillings, it shall not be said that I gave you less.'

He handed her the coin, and with a scowl passed on.

Kainie remained for a moment musing, with lowered eyes. Then she raised her head, shook

it, as though to shake off the sadness, the humiliation that had come on her with the words of Drownlands, and hummed—

'Nobody coming to marry me,
Nobody coming to woo.'

'What! Kainie!'

The words were those of a young man, heavy-browed, pale, somewhat gaunt, with long arms.

'Oh, Pip!—Pip!—Pip!'

'What is the matter, Kainie?'

'Pip, I'm the only girl here without her young man. It is terrible—terrible; and see, Pip, I've got two crowns to spend, and I don't know what to spend them on. There is too much money here for sweetie stuff; and as for smart ribbons and bonnets and such like, it is only just about once in the year I can get away from the mill and come into town and show myself. It does seem a waste to spend a couple of crowns on dress, when no one can see me rigged out in it. What shall I do, Pip?—you wise, you sensible, you dear Pip.'

The young man, Ephraim Beamish, considered; then he said—

'Kainie, I don't like your being alone in Red Wings. Times are queer. Times will be worse. There is trouble before us in the Fens. Things cannot go on as they are—the labouring men ground down under the heels of the farmers, who are thriving and waxing fat. I don't like

In former times, for five-and-twenty miles north of Ely, one rippling lake extended, and men went by boat over it to the sand-dune that divided it from the sea at King's Lynn. To the west a mighty mere stretched from Ely to Peterborough. To the east lay a tangle of lake and channel, of marsh and islet.

Until about a hundred years ago, men lived in houses erected on platforms sustained upon piles above the level of the water. Walls and roofs of these habitations were thatched and wattled with reeds. From the door a ladder conducted to a boat. In these houses there were hearths, but no chimneys. The smoke escaped as best it might through the thatch, or under the gables. During the winter the fen-men picked up a livelihood fishing and fowling. In summer they cultivated such patches of peat soil as appeared above the surface of the water. There were no roads; men went from place to place by water, in boats or on skates.

In the reign of James I. Ben Jonson wrote his play 'The Devil is an Ass.' Into this play he introduced a speculator—a starter of bogus companies, by name Meercraft, and one of this man's schemes was the draining of the Fens.

> 'The thing is for recovery of drown'd land,
> Whereof the Crown's to have a moiety,
> If it be owner; else the Crown and owners
> To share that moiety, and the recoverers

To enjoy the t'other moiety for their charge,
. . . . . which will arise
To eighteen millions, seven the first year.
I have computed all, and made my survey
Unto an acre; I'll begin at the pan,
Not at the skirts, as some have done, and lost
All that they wrought, their timberwork, their trench,
Their banks, all borne away, or else filled up
By the next winter. Tut! they never went
The (right) way. I'll have it all.
A gallant tract of land it is;
'Twill yield a pound an acre;
We must let cheap ever at first.'

Jonson introduced this Meercraft as a caution to the people of his day against being induced to sink money in such ventures, which he regarded as impossible of realisation. Nevertheless, what Jonson disbelieved in has been accomplished. The work begun in 1630, was interrupted by the Civil Wars, resumed afterwards, was carried on at considerable outlay and with great perseverance, till at the beginning of the present century the complete recovery of the Fens was an accomplished fact.

Great was the cost of the undertaking, and those who had invested in it wearied of the calls on their purses; land, or rather water, owners were discouraged, and were ready to part with rights and possessions that hardly fetched a shilling an acre, and which instead of being drained itself seemed to be draining their pockets. Long-headed fen-men saw their advantage, and bought eagerly where the owners

sold eagerly. The new canals carried off the water, the machines set in operation discharged the drainage into the main conduits, and soil that for centuries had been worthless became auriferous. No more magnificent corn-growing land was to be found in England. None in Europe might compare with it, save the delta of the Danube and the richest alluvial tracts in South Russia. The fen-men made their fortunes before they had learned what to do with the fortunes they made. Money came faster than they found means to spend it.

To this day many of the wealthiest owners are sons or grandsons of half-wild fen-slodgers. There are no villages in the Fens apart from such as are clustered on widely dispersed islets. There are no old picturesque farmhouses and cottages. Everything is new and ugly. There are no hedges, no walls, for there is no stone in the country. There are no trees, save a few willows and an occasional ash, from whose roots the soil has shrunk. The surface of the land is sinking. As the fen is drained, the spongy soil contracts, and sinks at the rate of two inches in the year. Consequently houses built on piles are left after fifty years some eight feet above the surface, and steps have to be added to enable the inmates to descend from their doors.

The rivers slide along on a level with the top storeys of the houses, and the only objects to

break the horizon are the windmills that drive the water up from the dykes into the canals.

There are no roads, as there is no material of which roads can be made. In place of roads there are 'droves.' A drove is a broad course, straight as an arrow, by means of which communication is had between one farm and another, and people pass from one village to another.

These droves have ditches, one on each side, dense in summer with bulrushes. No attempt is made to consolidate the soil in these droves other than by harrowing and rolling them in summer. In winter they are bogs, in summer they are dust—dust black, impalpable. Wheeled conveyances can hardly get along the droves in winter, or wet weather, as the wheels sink to the axles.

The canal banks, however, are solid, compacted of stiff clay, and as they are broad, so as to resist the pressure of the water they contain between them, their tops make very tolerable paths, and roads for those on horseback. But no wheeled vehicle is suffered to use the bank tops, and to prevent these banks from being converted into carriage roads, barriers are placed across them at intervals, which horses with riders easily leap.

At one of the Cambridge Assizes a poor man, a witness in court, when asked his profession answered,—'My lord, I am a banker.' The

judge, turning very red, said, 'No joking here, sir.' 'But I *am* a banker and nothing else,' protested the witness. He was, in fact, one of the gang of men maintained for the reparation of the canal banks.

The reader must be given some idea of the manner in which this vast level region is drained. It is cut up into large squares, and each square is a field that is surrounded by dykes. These dykes are in communication with one another, and all lead to a *drain* or *load*, that is to say, to a channel of water of a secondary size, that lies at the level of a few feet above the dykes. To convey the water from the ditches into the drains, windmills are erected, that work machinery which throws the water out of the ditches up hill into the loads. These loads or drains run to the canal at intervals of two miles; and when the drain reaches the canal bank, then a pump of great power forces the water of the load to a still higher level, into the main artery through which it flows to the sea. On the canals are lighters, and these, rather than waggons, serve for the conveyance of farm produce to the markets. Water is the natural highway in the fen-land.

The short October day had closed in. The fen lay black, streaked with steely bands—the dykes that reflected the grey sky.

On the right hand was a bank rising some fourteen feet above the roadway; it was the

embankment of the river or canal that goes by the name of the Lark. Above it, some wan stars were flickering. On the left hand the fen stretched away into infinity, the horizon was lost in fog.

The Cheap Jack's horse was crawling, reeling along the drove under the embankment, the van plunging into quagmires, lurching into ruts. The horse strained every muscle and drew it forward a few yards, then sighed, hung his head, and remained immovable. Once again he nerved himself to the effort, and as the van started, its contents tinkled and rattled. The brute might as well have been drawing it across a ploughed field. Again he heaved a heavy sigh, and then finally abandoned the effort.

The Cheap Jack had got out of the conveyance. He was unwell, too unwell to walk, but he could not think of adding his weight to that the poor horse was compelled to drag over what was not the apology for, but the mockery of a road.

'I say, Zit,' muttered he hoarsely, 'I wish now as we'd a' stayed overnight in Ely.'

'I wish we had, father. And we could have afforded it; we've made fine profits in Ely—tremenjous.'

The man did not respond. He trudged and stumbled on.

The drove was as intolerable to walk on as to drive along.

'Well, I never came along roads like these

afore,' said the girl, 'and I hopes we may soon be out of the Fens, and never get into them again.'

'I don't know as we shall ever get out,' said the man, reeling as one drunk. 'It seems as if we was sinking—sinking—and the black mud would close over us.'

'Come along, Jewel!' said Zita to the old horse. 'I'd put the lash of the whip across you, but I haven't the heart to do it.'

'This is going like snails,' groaned the man.

'It's going worse than snails,' retorted his daughter. 'Snails carry their houses safely along with them, but I doubt if we shall convey our van out of this here region o' stick-in-the-mud, without all its in'ards being knocked to bits. We'll have to yarn tremenjous, father, to cover the dints in the tin and the cracks in the crocks.'

The man halted.

'I don't think I can get no forrarder,' said he; 'I'm all of a quake and a chill.'

'Well, father, let us put up here. It's no odds to us where we stay.'

'But it is to the hoss. What's Jewel to eat? There's nought but mud and rushes. If we do take him out of the shafts, he'll tumble into one of the ditches.'

'I wonder what is the distance to Littleport?' asked the girl. 'But, bless me! on these roads it's no calculating distances. There was a man rode by us on the bank above. He had lanterns to his stirrups. I wish I'd gone up the side and

just asked him how far ahead it was to Littleport. Now he's got a long way ahead, and it's no use to run after him.'

'We must go on. I doubt but we shall sink in the mire if we stay.'

The man sighed and staggered forward. Then the horse also sighed and endeavoured to move the van, but failed. It was fast.

'What is to be done now? There's Jewel can't stir the caravan. Did you notice, father, how that man's horse jumped as he rode by? There is a sort of a rail across, or we would have tried to get the conveyance up on the bank. When the horse jumped, up went the lanterns also. I suppose there is some farm near here where they'll let us put up Jewel for the night. We needn't trouble then, as we have our own house on wheels. But Jewel must have his food and a stall.'

At that moment a second rider appeared on the embankment, trotting in the same direction as had the first. He had a single lantern attached to one stirrup, whereas the first who had passed, and been noticed by Zita, had two. The girl ran up the slope of the bank, calling.

The rider drew rein. 'What do you want?' he inquired.

'Oh, will you tell me where we can put our horse for the night and have a little hay?'

'Who are you?'

Zita knew by the tone of the voice that the

man had been drinking, and that, though not inebriated, he had taken too much liquor—

'We are the Cheap Jack and his daughter. We cannot get along the way, it is so bad—and the wheels are stuck in the mud. We want to go to Littleport, and father'—

'You are a set of darned rascals!' interrupted the rider. 'I'll have nothing more to do with you; and you, I suppose, are the gal as cheated me—the worst of the lot you are.' He had a flail in his hand, and he flourished it over his head. 'You get along, you Cheap Jackies, or I'll bring the flail down about your heads and shoulders and loins, and make you fish out that there guinea I paid—and more fool I.' Driving his heels into the flanks of his horse, and slashing its neck with the loop of his bridle, he galloped along the top of the embankment.

Zita descended.

The van was stationary. The horse, Jewel, stood with drooping head and a pout on the nether lip, with legs stiff in the deep mire, resolute not to budge another inch. Zita took the van lantern and went to his head. Jewel had thrown an expression into his face that proclaimed his resolution not to make another effort, whether urged on by whip, or cajoled by caresses. The girl, still carrying the lantern, came to her father. He was seated against the embankment, with his hands in his pockets and his head fallen forward.

'Father, how are you?'

'Bad—bad—tremenjous.'

'Father, let us walk on and seek a house. Jewel will not stir; he has turned up his nose and set back his ears, and I know what that means. I don't think any one will come this way and rob the van. Let us go on together. You lean on me, and we will find a farm.'

'I can't rise, Zit.'

'Let me help you up.'

'I couldn't take another step, Zit.'

'Make an effort, father.'

'I'm past that, Zit. I'm dying. It's o' no use urging of me. I sticks here as does Jewel. I can't move. I'm too bad for that. O Lord! that I should die in this here fen-land!'

'Let me get you some brandy.'

'It ain't of no use at all, Zit. I'm just about done for. 'Tis so with goods at times; when they gets battered and bulged and broken and all to pieces, they must be chucked aside. I'm no good no more as a Cheap Jack. I'm battered and bulged and broken and all to pieces, so I'm going to be chucked aside.'

Zita considered for a moment. Then she set down the lantern at her father's side, ran up the embankment, ran along it in the direction which had been taken by the riders, one after the other, crying as loud as she possibly could, 'Help! help! Father is dying. Help! help! help!'

CHAPTER V.

THE FLAILS AGAIN.

HEZEKIAH, or, as he was usually called for short, Ki, Drownlands was riding homewards from the Ely Fair along the embankment of the river Lark. He bore over his shoulder the flail that had cost him twelve shillings and sixpence, and in his heart glowed a consuming rage that his adversary and neighbour—perhaps adversary because neighbour—Jeremiah or Jake Runham had paid a guinea for the companion flail, and had outbidden him.

It was not that Ki Drownlands particularly required a flail, or a companion flail to that he had secured, but he was intolerant of opposition, and it was his ambition to be first in his fen; he would show his supremacy by outbidding the only man approaching him in wealth and in influence, and that before a crowd made up in part of people who knew him and his rival. It was gall to his liver to think that he had been surpassed in his offer, that an advantage over

him had been snatched, and that Jake Runham had been able to carry off from under his nose something—it mattered not what—that he, Ki Drownlands, had coveted, and had let people see that he had coveted.

The rivalry of these two landowners was known throughout the Ely Fens, and in every tavern the talk was certain to turn on the bidding for the flails, and folk would say, 'Jake is a better man than Ki by eight shillings and sixpence.'

Drownlands had been drinking, and this fact served to sharpen and inflame his resentment, but he was able to ride upright and steadily, and sit his horse upright and steadily as the beast leaped the barriers on the bank. He carried, as already mentioned, lanterns below both feet attached to the stirrups. They illumined the way, they flashed upon obstructions, they sent a gleam over the water of the canal. In the dark—and the night was at times pitch-dark, when clouds cut off the light of the stars—then it was not safe to ride on the embankment without a light. The horse might fail to see the barriers, and precipitate itself against them. It might slip down the bank and fall with its rider, on one side into the river, on the other into the drove. On the one side the horseman might be drowned, on the other break his neck. But, supposing the horse had its wits about it and its eyes open, the rider

might have neither, and be unprepared for the leap, or the slip in the greasy marl.

If, conscious of the risk when on the embankment, the horseman took the drove; then also he was not safe, for there it was doubly dark, shadowed on one side by the elevation of the embankment, whilst on the other side lay the dyke, the water brimming, and disguised by sedge and rushes. Into this a horse might plunge, and, once in, could not be extricated without infinite labour by several hands. For the bottom of the ditches is soft bog, and the sides are spongy peat. Not a particle of firm substance can be found on which a horse may plant its feet, and obtain the purchase necessary for lifting itself out of the water and mire. Consequently, when farmers returned late from market and fair in the long dark winter nights, they provided themselves with lanterns.

Prickwillow was the name of the farm of Master Ki Drownlands. The grandfather of Ki had possessed a reed-walled cottage on piles, and a few acres of soil that showed above the water in March, was submerged again for a while in July, and then reappeared as the rainy season ceased. Here he was wont to prick in willow twigs that rapidly grew into osier beds. On a platform above the rippling water the grandfather had mended his nets and cleaned his fowling-piece, and the grandmother had woven baskets. Now all was dry, and a house

stood where had been the lacustrine habitation, and the plough turned up the thousand odds and ends that successive generations had cast out of the cottage into the water, never expecting that they would be seen again.

The flood had retreated, dry land had appeared, and the ark had rested on what had formerly been the least submerged portion of the tract over which the ancestral slodger, Drownlands, had exercised more or less questionable rights; rights, however, which, though questionable, had never been questioned. With a little money collected by industry, and more borrowed from the Ely bank, the *père* Drownlands had extended his domain, and had rendered his claim absolute and his rights unassailable.

And now Ki Drownlands was riding home in a fume of wounded pride, and with a brain somewhat turned by brandy. He sharply drew rein; he thought he heard a cry. The cry was repeated as he halted to listen. From whence it came he could not judge, saving only that it proceeded from the rear. Over the fen, as upon water, sound travels great distances; over the fen, as over water, meeting with no obstructions, the waves of sound pass, and it is not easy to judge distances. Drownlands turned his horse about and faced in the direction of Ely, the direction whence the call came, as far as he could judge.

He saw a light approaching. Was it carried,

or hung to a stirrup? He could not tell. Was it the lantern-bearer who summoned him? If so, for what object? The cry was repeated.

Surely the voice was that of a female. If the appeal were not to him, to whom could it be addressed?

To the best of his knowledge, there was no one else out so late on the embankment. He recalled passing no one.

It was true that he had ridden by the van, but he had not seen it. The van was in the drove below, and he had been twelve or fourteen feet above the roadway. Moreover, the lanterns at his feet threw a halo about him, and though they illumined every object that came within their radius, yet they made all doubly obscure and everything indistinguishable that was outside that radius.

Furthermore, Drownlands had been occupied with his own thoughts, and had not been in an observant mood.

Zita had not addressed him as he rode by, and he had passed without any notion that there were travellers toiling along in the same direction at a lower level. He had not expected to see a conveyance there, and had looked for none.

The light that he noticed on the bank was approaching. It was held at no great distance from the ground. It might equally be carried in the hand of one on foot, or be swung from the stirrups of a rider. It was, however, impro-

bable that a horseman would be contented with a single light.

Drownlands did not ride forward to meet the advancing light. He remained stationary, with his right hand holding the flail, so that the end of the staff rested on his thigh, much as a field-marshal is represented in pictures holding his *bâton*.

In the Fens the horses are unshod, and on a way that is without stones there will be little sound of a horse when trotting; but as the moving light neared, Drownlands was aware from the vibration of the embankment that a horse was approaching.

A minute later, and he saw before him Jake Runham, mounted.

The recognition was mutual.

'Out of my way!' shouted Runham. 'Out of my way, you dog, or I will ride you down!'

'I will not get out of your way. Why did you call?'

'I call? I call you? That's a likely tale. What should I want with a twopenny-ha'penny chap such as you?'

'Twopenny-ha'penny? Do you mean me?'

'Yes, I do.'

'You are drunk. Some one called.'

'Not I. But I call now, and loud enough. Stand out of my way; get down the side of the bank; and go to the devil.'

'I will not make way for you,' said Drown-

lands. Then between his teeth, 'It is well we have met.'

'Ay, it is well.'

'Now we can settle old scores. Now'—he looked up, and waved his flail towards heaven, which was clad with clouds—'now that no eyes look down from above, and we are quite sure there are no eyes watching us from below'—

Then Runham, with a yell, dug his spurs into the flanks of his steed, and made him bound forward. His intention was, with the impetus, to drive his adversary and horse down the bank. As it was, his horse struck that of Drownlands, which, being a heavy beast, swerved but slightly.

'Keep off, you drunken fool!' shouted Ki.

'Am I to keep off you? I? Not I. I will have the bank to myself. Let me pass, or I will ride over you and tread your brains out.'

'You will have the matter of the past fought out between us?'

'Ay! Ay!'

Jake backed his horse, snorting and plunging under the curb.

Then, when he had retired some twenty yards, he uttered a halloo, whirled his flail above his head, drove his heels into the sides of his steed, and came on at a gallop.

Drownlands raised and brandished his flail, and brought it down with a sweep before him. This alarmed his own horse, which reared and started, but more so that of his rival, which

suddenly leaped on one side, and nearly unseated Jake Runham. However, Jake gripped the pommel, and with an oath urged his horse into the path again.

Drownlands had forgotten about the call that had induced him to turn his horse. His attention was solely occupied with the man before him.

The situation was one in which two resolute men, each determined not to yield to the other, each inflamed with anger against the other, must fight their controversy out to the end. The way on the bank top would not admit of two abreast, consequently not of one passing the other without mutual concession. On the one side was the drove fourteen feet below, on the other the canal. He who had to give way must roll down the embankment into the drove or plunge into the water.

Each man was armed, and each with a like weapon.

It would seem as though the horses understood the feelings that actuated their riders, and shared them. They snorted defiance, they tossed their manes, they reared and pawed the air.

Again Runham spurred his steed, and the beasts clashed together, and as they did so, so also did the flails.

The two men were at close quarters, too close for the flappers of the flails to take full effect. They heaved their weapons and struck

furiously at each other, bruising flesh, but breaking no bones. The strokes of the whistling flappers fell on the saddle back, on the sides of the horses, rather than on the heads and shoulders of the men. The lanterns jerked and danced, as the horses pawed and plunged, and bit at each other.

The men swore, and strove by main weight to force each other from the bank,—Runham to drive his antagonist into the river, Drownlands by side blows of the flail to force the opposed horse to go down the bank into the drove.

The struggle lasted for some minutes. To any one standing by it would have seemed a confusion of dancing lights and reflections—a confusion also of oaths, blows, and clash of steel bits, and thud of ashen staves.

Then, by mutual consent, but unexpressed, the two men drew back equally exhausted. They drew back with no thought of yielding, but with intent to recover wind and strength to renew the contest. Both antagonists remained planted opposite each other, panting, quivering with excitement, their beasts steaming in the cold October night air.

'You dared to call me by an ugly name before folk!' shouted Drownlands.

'Dared?—I will do it again.'

'You shall not be given the chance.'

'I carried away the flail over your head because you hadn't more shillings in your pocket.'

The struggle lasted some minutes.—p. 52.

'The flail?' echoed Drownlands. 'This is not a matter now of a flail. This is not a matter now of a way along the bank. It's a matter of nineteen years' endurance. For nineteen years I have borne the grossest of wrongs. I'll bear the burden no longer. The wrong shall not go another hour unavenged.'

'You've borne it so long the back is accustomed to the burden,' taunted Jake.

'For nineteen years I have endured it. But to-night we are face to face, and alone.' Again he waved his flail to heaven. 'No eye looks down upon us. I and you are equally matched as far as weapons go. All is fair between us, but if there be justice on high, it will weight my arm to beat you down; and here,' said he, touching his breast with the end of the flail,—'here is no spark of pity, just as there is now no spark aloft. If I beat you, I beat you till the blood runs, beat you till the bones are pounded, beat you till the marrow oozes out, beat you—as we beat hemp.'

Then, unable longer to control his fury, the dark man urged his horse forward with his spurs, and as he did so, the lanterns clashed against the flanks of the brute, and burnt them as the spurs had stung them. With a snort of anger and pain, the beast leaped into the air, flung himself forward, and hurled his whole weight against the horse of Runham. The latter had altered his tactics, and had drawn up

to receive the charge instead of delivering it as before. At the same moment Ki swung his flail and brought it down. But he had overshot his mark, and with the violence of the blow he was carried across the neck of Runham's horse. Jake saw his advantage at once, caught him by the tiger-skin, and, grappling that, endeavoured to drag his opponent out of the saddle. But Ki reared himself up, and tried to wrench the skin away. His bodily strength was the greatest. The horses leaped, kicked, reeled, and the two men on them held fast, the tiger-skin between them. Then Runham twisted his flail in the skin and continued to turn it. In vain now did Ki endeavour to wrench it away. The skin was fast about his throat, and as it was drawn tighter and even tighter, it threatened strangulation. Jake backed his horse, and as he backed, he drew his opponent after him. The blood thumped in the ears of Drownlands. The veins in his temples swelled to bursting.

The plunging of the horses caused the pressure to be relaxed for one moment, but it was tightened the next, and became intolerable. Ki's tongue and eyes started, his lips were puffed, foam formed on them. He could not cry, he could not speak, he snuffled and gasped. With his heels he thrust his horse forward, to save himself from being drawn from his saddle to hang to the flail of Runham.

In another moment Drownlands would have been unhorsed and at his adversary's mercy. But at this supreme instant he clutched his own flail, and, holding it with both hands over his bent head, drove the end of it into the ear of Runham's horse. The more he was drawn forward, the greater the leverage on the end of his flail, and the more exquisite the agony of the horse. The brute, driven mad with pain, gathered itself up into a convulsive, spasmodic shake and leap, and with the jerk, the tiger-skin was plucked out of the hand of Jake Runham.

Drownlands reared himself in his stirrups. He was blinded with blood in his eyes, but he whirled the flail round his head, and beat savagely in all directions. It whistled as it swung, it screamed as it descended. Then a thud, a cry, and indistinctly, through the roar of his pulses in his ears, he heard a crash down the bank, and indistinctly through his suffused eyes he saw a black mass stagger into the river.

Gasping for breath, quivering in every nerve, tingling in every vein, as the blood recovered its wonted circulation, Drownlands held his horse motionless, and, gathering his senses, looked before him.

There was hardly a flake of steely light in the sky. Clouds had spread over the firmament. What little light there was, lay as a strip on the horizon, like the glaze of white in a dead man's eye. The inky water reflected none of

it. For a moment, on the surface, the lantern attached to Runham's stirrup floated and danced, whilst the flame burnt and charred the horn side, then it was drawn under and extinguished.

Drownlands leaned forward and stretched his flail to the water; then drew the flapper across the surface where his enemy had sunk, as one who scratches out a score.

Then suddenly he was grasped by the foot, and a voice rang in his ears: 'Help! help! Oh, prithee, help!'

In his condition of nervous excitation, the touch, the call, so unexpected, wrung from him a scream. It was as though a rude hand had fallen on an exposed nerve.

Again a tighter clasp at his foot, again an entreating cry of intenser entreaty: 'Help! Oh, prithee, prithee, help!'

CHAPTER VI.

BETWEEN TWO LIGHTS.

ZITA had run on. Her young heart was full of the agony of distress for her father. He was the one object in the world to whom her heart clung. She had lost her mother early, and had been accordingly brought up by her father, who had been father and mother to her in one. She had no brothers, no sisters. He had been to her father, mother, brothers, and sisters in one. The young heart is full of love. It is of a clinging nature. It may not be disposed to demonstrativeness, but it loves, it clings; and it is in despair when the object to which it has clung, the person it has loved, fails.

For some little while, for more than the fortnight of which Zita had spoken, she had observed that her father was ill, that his powers were declining.

She had fought against the terrible thought that she would lose him, whenever with a flash

of horror it had shot through her brain, had contracted her heart.

Her father! The daily associate; the one person to whom she could always speak with frankness, with whom she had had but one interest; the one person who had watched over her, cared for her, loved her—that he should be suffering, that he might be removed! The idea was more than her young heart could bear. Cheap Jacks are human beings, they have like feelings to us who buy not of Cheap Jacks, but of respectable tradesmen. Cheap Jacks' daughters, though they have not had the privileges of the moral and intellectual training that have ours, are nevertheless—human beings. We admit this tacitly, but do not think out the truth such an admission contains—that they have in their natures the same mixed propensities, in their hearts the same passions as ourselves—as have our own children.

Now this poor child ran, her pulses beating; as she ran, with every rush of blood through her pulses, a fire shot in electric flashes before her eyes. She continuously cried, 'Help! help! My father! my daddy!'

Then her breath failed her. She tried to run, but was forced to stay her feet and gasp for breath. She could not maintain her pace as well as call for assistance.

There was a roaring as of the sea over a bar when the tide is coming in. It was the roar of her thundering blood in her ears.

She had taken the van lantern and had set it down by her father on the side of the bank. As she was forced to halt, she looked back. A shudder came over her. She could not see the light. Had it expired, and with it, had the flickering light of life expired in her father?

Then she stepped partly down the bank, and now she saw the light. From the top she had not been able to see it owing to the slope, and for a slight curve in the direction of the canal. The light that burned by her father's side was still there. And before her she could see the sparks in the direction she was pursuing. A strange medley of lights—were there two or three or more? She could not count, owing to her excitement and the tears and sweat that streamed over her eyes.

She ran on, as the furious throbbing of her heart was allayed, as her breath returned.

Suddenly—a crash, a flash as of lightning, and Zita knew not where she was, and for how long she had been in a state of semi-consciousness.

The poor child, running with full speed, had run against one of the barriers set up across the top of the embankment for the prevention of its employment by wheeled vehicles.

She had struck her head and chest against the bars, and had been thrown backwards, partly stunned, completely dazzled by the blow. For some minutes she lay on the bank confused and

in pain. Then she picked herself up, but was unable to understand what had happened. She again went forward, and now felt the bars of timber. She put her hands to them and climbed. She was sobbing with pain and anxiety; through her tears she could see the lights in front of her magnified with prismatic rays shooting from them. On reaching the top of the barrier she looked behind her, and again saw the feeble light from her father's lantern.

Now her senses returned to her, which for a few moments had been disturbed by the blow and fall.

She was running to obtain help, shelter for her dear father. From the top rail she cried, 'Help! help! My daddy! My poor daddy! Help! help!'

She listened. She thought she heard voices. Hurt, wearied, breathless, she hoped that the assistance she had invoked was coming to her aid.

Should she remain perched where she was, and wait till the lights in front drew nearer to her?

Then the fear came over her that she might not have been heard. The man to whom she had spoken—he with the one lantern to his stirrup—had addressed her roughly, had shown no good feeling, no desire to assist. Was it likely that he had changed his mind, and was now returning?

She was confident that the man whom she had arrested had carried but a single lantern to his foot. Now as her pulses became more even in their throb, she was positive that there were more lights than one before her. She looked behind her. There was one light by her father, that was stationary. There were several before her; and they were in the strangest movement, flickering here and there, changing places, now obscured, now shining out, now low, now high, now on this side, now on that.

She leaped from her place on the rail and ran on.

Then, coming on an unctuous place in the marl, where a horse's hoofs had been, where, perhaps, it had slipped, and, running in a bee-line, regardless where she went, ignorant of a slight deviation from the direct line in the course of the bank, she went down the side, and plunged into the ice-cold water.

There was a stake, a post in the water. She clung to that, and, holding it, struggled to get out. In so doing, she noticed a sort of eye in the post, a mortice-hole that pierced it, and as at that moment some of the clouds had parted, she saw the grey sky and a star shine through this hole. By means of this post, Zita, whose strength was almost spent, was able to draw herself from out of the water. But so exhausted was she, that, on reaching the top of the bank, she was constrained to stop and pant for breath.

Still the thought of her suffering, perhaps dying, father, urged her on. She saw the dancing lights close before her, she heard voices. She felt the embankment tremble under her feet. Surely some violent commotion was taking place before her; but what it could be she had neither time nor power to conjecture.

Then there went by overhead, invisible in the darkness, a train of wild geese, going south for the winter, and as they flew they uttered loud, wild cries, like the barking of hounds in the clouds—a horrible, startling sound fit to unnerve any who were unaware of the cause.

For a moment she stood still, listening to the aerial ghostly sounds. She held her breath. Then again she ran.

As Zita ran, it seemed to her that assuredly she saw but two lights. There must have been but two, and they were stationary. She tried to call, but her voice failed her; her throat was parched. She could but run.

Next moment the lights blazed large on her, and then she grasped a foot. 'Help! help!'

CHAPTER VII.

PROFITS.

'WHAT do you want? Who are you?' asked Ki Drownlands, when he had sufficiently recovered his self-possession to see that some one was clinging to him, and that that person was a woman.

'Help! Come back! Father is ill.'

'I don't care. Let go. You hurt me.'

She hurt him by her touch on his boot! His nerves were thrilling, and the pressure of her fingers was unendurable in the surexcitation of every fibre of his system.

'Oh, help! help!' She would not relax her hold.

'I cannot. I've my own concerns to attend.'

Drownlands remained silent for a moment. He was shivering as one in an ague fit—shivering as though the marrow in his bones were touched with frost. Presently he asked in a voice of constraint—

'How long have you been here? What have you seen?'

He stooped to his stirrup, unhitched one of the lanterns and held it aloft, above the person who appealed for his aid.

The dim yellow light fell over a head of thick amber hair and a pale, beautifully moulded face, with large lustrous eyes, looking up entreatingly at him.

His hand that held the lantern was unsteady, and the light quivered. To disguise his agitation, he gave the lantern a pendulous motion, and the reflection glinted and went out, glinted again in those great beseeching eyes, and glowed in that copper-gold hair, as though waves of glory flashed up in the darkness and set again in darkness.

'What have you seen?' he repeated.

'Seen?—I see you. I want help. You will help me?'

'How long have you been here?'

'How long? I am but this instant come. I have run.'

Her bosom was heaving under a gay kerchief, her breath came in little puffs of steam that passed as golden dust in the halo of the lantern.

Drownlands rested both his hands on the pommel of the saddle, with the flail athwart beneath them. He put the handle of the lantern in his mouth, and the upward glare of the light was on his sinister face. He was considering.

He did not recognise the girl. His mind was too distraught to think whether or not he had seen her before. She persisted—

'Help us! I have been running. I am out of breath. I saw you ride by on the bank. I called to you, and spoke to you there, and you would do nothing. My dear father is worse. He is dying. You must—you shall help.'

He still looked at her. That beautiful face—the sole object shining out of the darkness—fascinated him, in spite of his alarm, his distress.

'I am Cheap Jack Zita. I am the daughter of the poor Cheap Jack. He is taken ill—he cannot get on. He is on the bank—dying. My father!'

Then she burst into tears; and in the lantern light Ki saw the sparkling drops race down the smooth cheeks, saw them rise in the great eyes and overflow. He slowly removed the lantern handle from his teeth, and said—

'I cannot be plagued with you. I have other matters that concern me.'

He had been alarmed at first, fearing lest his encounter with Runham had been witnessed, lest this girl should be able to testify against him, were he taken to task for the death of his rival and adversary.

'Oh, come! Oh, do come!' sobbed Zita, as she grasped his boot more tightly.

'It was you who called?'

'Yes, it was I.'

'You called me?'

'Yes. There was no one else to call.'

'Oh,' said he, 'you saw no one else? No one with me?'

'No. I ran up the bank as you went by. I spoke to you, but you swore at me.'

'I—I did that?'

There was some mistake. She had taken him for the man now beneath the water.

'You shall not go!' cried the girl, clinging desperately to the stirrup. 'You cannot be so heartless as to let my poor father die.'

What is your father to me? Let go.'

'I will not let go.'

He pricked his horse on; but she held to the bridle and arrested it.

'Take care!' said Drownlands. 'I will not be stayed against my will.'

She clung to the bridle.

'You may ride over me, and kill me too. I will not let go.'

'What do you mean?' asked he, with a gasp. 'What do you mean by "kill me too"?'

'You shall ride over me, but I shall not let go.'

'But why did you say "kill me too"?' he asked threateningly.

'I will die as well as my father. I do not care to live if he die. How can you leave him? how can you be so cruel?' She broke forth into vehemence that shook her whole

frame, and shook the horse whose bridle she grappled.

'What's that?' asked Drownlands, as the horse stumbled.

He held up the lantern.

On the embankment, under the horse's feet, lay the flail that had been twisted into his tiger-skin.

'I know you—I know you,' said the girl. 'It was you who bought the flail.' Then again, 'My father is ill. He is sitting on the bank; he cannot walk. He will die of the cold if you do not help.'

'Let go,' shouted Drownlands, 'or I'll bring the flail down on your hands.'

'You may break them. I will cling with my teeth.'

He brandished the flail angrily.

Then Zita bowed herself, picked up the second flail, and, planting herself across the way, said—

'You are bad and you are cruel. I cannot get you to come to my father for the asking. I will drive you to him—drive you with the flail; I will force you to go.'

He tried to pass the girl, but she would not budge; and before the whirling flapper and her threatening attitude, the horse recoiled and almost threw himself and his rider down the embankment into the drove.

Drownlands uttered a curse, and again

attempted to push past, but was again driven back by Zita.

'Take care, or I will ride you down,' he threatened; then shivered, as he recalled how that a few minutes previously Jake Runham had used the same threat to him.

He considered a moment.

He could not allow this girl to retain the flail she had picked up. It was evidence against him. Every one in Burnt Fen, every one in Weldenhall and Soham Fens, would hear of the contest at Ely before the Cheap Jack van. If that flail were known to have been found on the embankment, it would be known at once where it was that Runham fell into the Lark. It might be surmised that a struggle had there taken place, and marks of the struggle would be looked for.

The girl who stood before Drownlands was the sole person who could by any possibility appear as witness against him—could prove that he had been on the spot where Runham had perished; and this girl was now appealing to him for help. It was advisable that she should be conciliated—be placed under an obligation to himself.

He made no further attempt to pass her; he made no attempt to fulfil his threat that he would ride her down.

In a lowered tone he said, 'Where is your father?'

'A little way back,' answered Zita. 'How far back I cannot say. I ran—I ran.'

'I will go with you. Give me up that flail.'

'No,' she answered; 'I do not trust you. You would ride away when you had it.'

'I swear to you that I will not do that.'

She shook her head, retained the flail, slung it over her shoulder, and walked at his side.

Had she seen the contest? Had she seen him beat his adversary down—down into the river? Drownlands asked himself these questions repeatedly, and was tempted to question her, but shrank from so doing lest he should awake suspicions. He need not have feared that. Her whole mind was occupied with a single thought—her dying father.

Drownlands riding, the Cheap Jack girl walking, retraced the path in the direction of Ely. Not for a moment would she relax her hold on the bridle, for she could not trust the good faith of the rider. The river was stealing by, the current so sluggish that it seemed hardly to move. It made no ripple on the bank, no lapping among the reeds. It had no curl of a smile on its face, no undulation on its bosom. It was a river that had gone to sleep, and was on the verge of the stagnation of death. Ki found himself wondering how far during the night the man and horse who had gone in would be swept down. He wondered whether it were possible that one or other had succeeded in making

his way out. He had heard no sound; it was hardly possible that either could have escaped.

Presently a jerk on the reins roused Drownlands from his meditations, and he felt his horse descend the bank, guided by the girl. In the darkness he could see a still darker object, which the faint light from a lantern on the bank partially illumined, along with a motionless horse, which seemed of very stubbornness to be transformed to wood. When, however, the beast heard the steps of its mistress, it turned its head and looked stonily towards her, with a peculiar curl of the nose and protrusion of the lower lip that was a declaration of determined resistance to being made to move forward. Zita paid no attention to the horse. She called to her father, and received a faint response.

'You will not leave me now? you will help? —you swear?' said she, turning to the rider.

'No,' answered Ki; 'now that I am here, I am at your service to do for you what I can.'

He dismounted and attached his horse by the bridle to the back of the van, then took one of his lanterns, and went to where he heard Zita speaking to her father.

'I be bad, Zit—bad—tremenjous. I be done for,' said the Cheap Jack. 'It's no good saying "Get along." I can't; there's the fact. I be stuck—just as the van be. I seems to have no wish but to be let alone and die slick off.'

'You shall not do that, father. Here is one of the gentlemen as bought the flails of us. He will help.'

Then Drownlands came to the side of the sick man and inquired, 'What is it? What can I do for you?'

'I don't know as I want nort,' answered the Cheap Jack; 'nort but to be let alone to die. Don't go and worrit me, that's all.'

'My farm is not a mile distant,' said Ki. 'Get into the waggon and drive along.'

'I can't abear the joggle,' answered the Cheap Jack. 'I wants to go nowhere. But whatever will become of Jewel and Zit?'

He groaned, sighed, and turned over on the bank towards the scanty grass and short moss that covered the marl, and laid his face in that. The girl held his hand, and knelt by him. Presently he raised his head and said, 'Arter all, Zit, we did a fine business, what wi' the tea and what wi' the flails. Them as didn't cost us eighteenpence sold for one pun' thirteen and six —tremenjous!'

'Now listen to me,' said Drownlands. 'This horse of yours will never be able to get the van along. I will ride home and fetch a team, and we'll have the whole bag of tricks conveyed to Prickwillow in a jiffy. I'll bring help, and we'll lift you on to a feather tye.'

'You will not play me false?' asked Zita.

'Not I,' answered Ki, as he picked up the

second flail; 'trust me. I shall be back in half an hour.'

He mounted his horse and rode away. The girl watched him as he departed with some anxiety; then, as he departed into the darkness, Zita seated herself on the bank, and endeavoured to raise her father, that his head might repose on her bosom. He looked at her and put his arm about her neck.

'You've been a good gal,' said he. 'You've done your dooty to the wan and the 'oss and me, and I bless you for it. That there tea as we made out o' sweepin's as we bought at London Docks, and out o' blackthorn leaves as we picked off the hedges and dried on the top of the wan—'twas a fine notion, that. Go on as I've taught you, Zit, and you'll make a Cheap Jack o' the right sort. One pun' thirteen and six for them flails! That's about one pun' twelve profits. What's us sent into the world for but to make profits? I've done my dooty in it. I've made profits. I feel a sort o' in'ard glow, just as if I wos a lantern wi' a candle in me, when I thinks on it. One pun' twelve—I say, Zit, what's that per cent.? I can't calkerlate it now; it's gone from me. One pun' twelve is thirty-two. And thirty-two to one and an 'arf'—He heaved a long sigh. 'I be bad—I can't calkerlate no more.'

Zita leaned over the sick man's face, and with the corner of her gaily figured and coloured

kerchief wiped his brow. His mind was wandering. From silence and impatience of being spoken to and having to exert himself to speak, he had come to talk, and talk much, in rambling strains.

'Father, I've brought you some brandy from the van. Take a drop. It may revive you.'

She put a flask to his lips. He found a difficulty in swallowing, and turned his face away. He had raised his head to the flask with an effort; it sank back on his daughter's bosom.

'Dad, how wet your hair is!'

'Things ain't as they ort to be,' said the Cheap Jack sententiously. 'I've often turned the world over in my head and seed as the wrong side comes uppermost. Then I'm sure I was ordained to be a mimber o' parliament, but I never got a chance to rise to it. How I could ha' talked the electors over into believin' as black was white! How I could ha' made 'em a'most swallow anything and believe it was apricot jam! I could ha' told 'em lies enough to carry me to the top o' the poll by a thumping majority. It's lies does it, all the world over—leastways with the general public in England. It's lies sells damaged goods. It's lies as makes 'em turn their pockets out into your lap. It's lies as carries votes. It's lies as governs the land. The general public likes 'em. It loves 'em. They be as sweet and dear to the general public as thistles is to asses.'

Then he lay quiet, except only that he turned his head from side to side, as though looking at something.

'What is it, dad?'

'I thinks as I sees 'em—miles and miles, going right away into nothing at all.'

'What, father?'

'The hawthorn hedges in full bloom, white as snow—it's our own tea plantation, Zit, you know — touched up wi' sweepins. When the flowers fall, then the leaves will come, and there'll be profits. Assam, Congou, Kaisow, Darjeeling, Souchong—just what you like—and, in truth, hawthorn leaves and sweepins—all alike. There's profits—profits comin' in the leaves, Zit.'

A light sleet was falling, and it gleamed in the radiance of the lantern planted on the bank near the dying man's head.

'So you see, Zit,' he said, pointing into space, 'the thorn leaves be fallin',—scores o' thousands, —and the green leaves will come and bring profits.'

'What you see is snow that is coming down, father.'

'No, Zit. It's the thorns sheddin' their white flowers to grow profits. Fall, fall, fall away, white leaves.'

He remained silent for a while, and then began to pluck at his daughter with the hand that clasped her waist.

'What is it, father?'

'I ain't easy.'

'Shall I lift your head higher?'

''Tain't that. It's in my mind, Zit.'

'What troubles you, dad?'

'That tin kettle wi' the hole in it. I've never stopped it. Put a bit o' cobbler's wax into the hole and some silverin' stuff over it, and you'll sell it quick off. Nobody won't find out till they comes to bile water in it.'

'I'll do that, father. Hush! I hear the horses coming.'

'I don't want to go wi' them. I hears singing.'

'It is the wind whistling.'

'No, Zit. It be the quiristers chanting in Ely. Do you hear their psalm?'

'No, we cannot hear them. They do not sing at night, and are also too distant.'

'But I does hear 'em singing beautiful, and this is the psalm they sing—"One pun' twelve —and hawthorn tea at four shillin'. There's profits."'

He was sinking. He weighed heavy on her bosom.

She stooped to his ear and whispered, 'Are you happy, father?'

'Happy? In course I be. One pun' twelve on them flails, and four shillin' on thorn leaves and sweepin's—there's profits—profits—tremenjous!'

And he spoke no more.

CHAPTER VIII.

MARK RUNHAM.

NO sight in the Fens is so solemn, so touching, as a funeral. There are no graveyards in the Fens. There is no earth to which the dead can be committed—only peat, and this in dry weather is converted into dust, and in rain resolved into a quagmire. A body laid in it would be exposed by the March winds, soddened by the November rains.

Consequently the dead are conveyed, sometimes as many as nine miles, to the islets—to Ely, to Stuntney, or to Littleport, wherever there is a graveyard; and a graveyard can only be where there is an outcrop of blue clay. For a funeral, the largest cornwain is brought forth, and to it is harnessed a team of magnificent cart-horses, trimmed out with black favours.

In the waggon is placed the coffin, and round it on the wain-boards sit the mourners. The sorrowful journey takes long. The horses step along slowly, their unshod feet muffled in the

dust or mire, and their tread is therefore noiseless. But their bells jingle, and now and then a sob breaks forth from one of the mourners.

Two waggons bearing dead men took the road to Ely. In one sat a single mourner, Zita; and this waggon preceded the other. The second was full, and was followed by a train of labourers who had been in the service of the deceased, and of acquaintances who had roistered or dealt with him.

A cold wind piped over the level, and rustled the harsh dun leaves of the rushes in the dykes. Royston crows in sable and white stalked the fields, dressed as though they also were mourners, but were uninvited, and kept at a distance from the train. Lines of black windmills radiated from every quarter of the heavens, as though they were mourners coming over the fens from the outermost limits to attend the obsequies of a true son of the marshland.

To the south-west stood up the isle of Ely, tufted with trees; and soaring above the trees, now wan against a sombre cloud, then dark against a shining sky, rose the mighty bulk of the minster, its size enhanced by contrast with the level uniformity of the country.

Although it cannot be said that no suspicion of foul play was entertained relative to the death of Jake Runham, yet nothing had transpired at the coroner's inquest that could in any way give it grounds on which to rest; nothing

that could in the smallest degree implicate Drownlands.

Runham had drunk freely at the tavern at Ely, and he had ridden away 'fresh,' as a witness euphemistically termed it, implying that he was fuddled. He had started on his home journey with a single lantern, in itself likely to occasion an accident, for it vividly illumined one side of the way and unduly darkened the other. Some one in the tavern yard had commented on this, and had advised the extinction of the single light as more calculated to mislead than none at all.

Horse and man had been discovered in the water about a mile above the drove that led to Crumbland, his farm. Runham had been found with his legs entangled in the stirrups. Possibly, had he been able to disengage himself when falling, he might have escaped to land. Certainly the horse would have found its way out; but the weight of the rider had prevented the poor beast from reaching the bank. It was observed that Runham had gone into the canal on his right hand, and that the lantern had been slung to his left foot.

There were, it was noticed, contusions on the head and body of the deceased, but these were easily accounted for without recourse to the supposition of violence. At intervals in the course of the Lark piles were driven into the banks to protect them against the lighters, and

horse and man might have been carried by the stream, or in their struggles, against these stakes, and thus the abrasions of the skin and the bruises might have been produced.

Something was, indeed, said about a recent quarrel between the dead man and his neighbour, Drownlands; but then, it was asked, when, for the last nineteen years, had there been an occasion on which they had met without quarrelling? The quarrel, according to report, had been inconsiderable, and had concerned nothing more than a flail for which both men had bidden high. Furthermore, Drownlands, it was ascertained, had been detained on his way to Prickwillow, before reaching the spot where the corpse had been found. He had been detained by the Cheap Jack's daughter on account of the Cheap Jack's sickness. It was known that Drownlands had summoned his men, and with a team of horses had removed the van to his rickyard. He had been attentive to the unfortunate vagabond, and had been at his side till his death.

There was no specifying the exact hour when Runham had fallen into the water, but, as far as could be judged, it must have been about the time when Drownlands was occupied with the Cheap Jack.

A floating suspicion that Ki might have had a hand in the death of Jake did exist, but there was nothing tangible on which a charge could

be based. On the contrary, there was a great deal to show that he was not present; enough to free him from suspicion.

When the funerals were over,—and both had taken place simultaneously, the graves being adjacent, one chaplain performing the service over both,—then the waggons returned. That in which the Cheap Jack's coffin had been conveyed to its last resting-place was empty. Zita declared her intention to walk.

Those who had walked behind the waggon of Runham were taken up into it, the horses started at a trot, and both conveyances were soon far away, and appeared as specks in the distance.

Zita walked slowly along the road. She was in no hurry. She had to resolve what she was to do for her maintenance.

Should she pursue the same trade as her father? Would it be safe for her to do so? At times there was a good deal of money in the van; and if she, a young girl, were alone, she might be robbed. She had abundance of ready wit, she had assurance, she had at command the stock-in-trade of old jokes used by her father, and was perfectly competent to sell goods and reap profits. But the purchase of the stock had been managed by her father, and with that part of the business she was not conversant. Could she manage the van and its stores and the horse alone? If not alone, then whom might she take into partnership with herself? Not another

girl. A man it must be; but a man—that would not do for other reasons. The girl coloured as she walked and pondered on the perplexed question of her future.

She then considered whether it would be advisable for her to dispose of her van and its contents. But she saw that she could do so only at a ruinous loss. Her situation would be taken advantage of. The damaged goods would not sell at all, unhelped out in the exaggerations, lies, the flourish and scuffle of a public auction. All the articles were not, indeed, like the tin kettle and the 'own plantation tea.' Some were really good. A majority were good, but the collection was spiced with infirm and defective articles.

If she did dispose of the van and her stock, what should she do with herself? Into service she could not go—the bondage would be intolerable. Into a school she could not go—she had no education. To become a dressmaker was not possible—she could not cut out. To enter a factory of any sort was hardly to be considered. She knew no trade. She could befool the general public—that was her sole accomplishment.

As she walked along, musing on her difficulties, she was caught up by a young man, dressed in deep mourning. At first he made as though he would pass her by, for he was walking at a greater pace than hers, but after a

few steps in advance he halted, turned back, and said in a kind tone—

'We are both orphans. You lost your father on the same night as that on which I lost mine. They have been buried on the same day, and the same service has been read over both. I am Mark Runham; you are the Cheap Jack girl.'

'Yes, I am Cheap Jack Zita.'

'I could not call you by any other name; your real name I did not know. Let us walk together, unless you desire to be alone.'

'Oh no.'

'When I was in the waggon, with my dead father in the coffin before me, I looked forward, and then I saw you—you, poor little thing, sitting alone, with your head bowed down over your father's coffin. I thought it infinitely sad. You were all alone, and I had so many with me.'

Zita turned her face to him.

'You are very kind,' she said.

'Not at all. My heart is sore because I have lost my father—but there is so much to take the sharpness off my pain; I have my mother alive. And you?'

'My mother has been dead these five years.'

'And I have many relatives, and more friends. But you?'

'I have none. I am alone in the world.'

'And then I have house and lands. And you?'

'I have the van.'

'A wandering house—no real house. What are you going to do with yourself?'

'That is just what I was considering as I walked along.'

'Will you tell me your plan?'

'I have none. I have not resolved what to do.'

'I am glad that I have caught you up. I sent on the waggon. I had to stay behind and make arrangements with the undertaker and the clerk. I am glad I remained; it has given me the opportunity of speaking with you. Our mutual losses make us fellows in sorrow, and you seem to me so piteously lonely. Even when I was in the wain my eyes wandered to you, and with my eyes went my thoughts. I could not fail to consider how much greater was your desolation than mine.'

Again Zita turned to look at the young fellow who spoke. He had fair hair, bright blue eyes, a fresh, pleasant face, frank and kindly.

'I think you sold something to my father,' he said; 'I have heard the chaps talk about it. You sold it middling dear. A flail—and he paid a guinea for it.'

'Yes, I sold a flail for a guinea, and another for twelve and six. Mr. Drownlands bought one of them.'

'And my father the other. I was not at the fair when that took place, but folk have talked

about it. I think, had I been there, I would have prevented my father bidding so high. The flail was not found with him when he was recovered from the river.'

'No; it was on the bank.'

'It was probably carried down by the Lark,' said he, not noticing her words, 'and went out in the Wash.'

The flail! Zita was surprised. One flail she knew that Drownlands held when she met him, the other she had herself picked up, and had used to prevent him from continuing his course, and to compel him to assist her father.

She stood still and considered. The matter was, however, of no consequence, so she stepped on. If she found the flail at Prickwillow, she would take it to Crumbland. It belonged to Mark Runham by right.

'What is it?' asked the young man, surprised at her look of concentrated thought.

'It is nothing particular,' she answered; 'something occurred to me—that is all. But it is of no matter.'

'I should like to know what is going to become of you,' said the young man. 'Have you no kindred at all?'

'None that I know of.'

'And no home?'

'None, as I said, but the van. When that is sold, I shall have none at all.'

'But you have friends?

'A friend—yes—Jewel, the old horse. Well, he ain't so old, neither. I call him old because I love him.'

'I say, when you've made up your mind what to do with yourself, come to our farm, Crumbland, and tell me.'

'That's blazin' impudence,' said Zita. 'If you want to know, you can come and ask of me.'

'I cannot do that. Do you not know that my father and Ki Drownlands were mortal enemies? I cannot set foot on his soil, or he would prosecute me for trespass. If I went to his door, I would be met with something more than bad words.'

'Why were they enemies?'

'I do not know. They have been enemies as long as I can remember anything. Well, you will let me have some tidings concerning you. I will come out on the embankment near Prickwillow, and you can come there too. It is so dreadful that you should have no one to care for you, and no place as a home to go to. If I can help you in any way tell me. My mother is most kind. As it has chanced that we have both been made orphans at one time, and as our two fathers were buried, as one may say, together, and as we are walking home together, it seems to me that it would be wrong and heartless were I to do nothing for you. To sit and nestle into my home and comforts at Crumb-

land and see you wander forth desolate and alone—the Pharisee couldn't have done half so bad with the poor man by the wayside, and I won't. I should never forgive myself. I should never forget the sight of the poor little lass in black, with the coffin in the great waggon, all alone.'

'You are kind,' said Zita, touched with the honest, genuine feeling his tones expressed. 'I thank you, but I want no help. I have money, I have goods, I have a horse, and I have a home on wheels. And I have—what is best of all—a spirit that will carry me along.'

'Yes; but one little girl is a poor and feeble thing, and the world is very wide and very wicked, and terribly strong. I'd be sorry that this bold spirit of yours were crushed by it.'

'Here is the place where I live,' said Zita.

'Yes, that's Prickwillow drove. Here am I, eighteen years old, and I have never been along it—never been on Drownlands farm, along of this quarrel. And what it was all about, blessed if I or any one else knows!'

Zita lingered a moment at the branch of the road. Mark put out his hand, and she took it.

'I'll tell you what,' said she; 'you've been kind and well-meanin' with me, and I'll give you a milk-strainer or a blacking-brush, whichever you choose to have.'

Mark Runham was constrained to laugh.

'I'll tell you which it is to be next time we meet; to-morrow on the embankment—just here. Remember, if you are short of anything beside a milk-strainer or a blacking-brush—it is yours.'

CHAPTER IX.

PRICKWILLOW.

A SLEEPLESS night followed the day of the funeral. Zita needed rest, but obtained none. She had brain occupied by care as well as heart reduced by sorrow. She had loved her father, the sole being in the world to whom she could cling, her sole stay. The wandering life she had led prevented her contracting friendships. Since her father's death she had lain at night in the van. This conveyance was so contrived as to serve many purposes. It was a shop, a kitchen, a parlour, an eating-house, a carriage, a bank. The goods were neatly packed, and were packed so close that the inmates could very commodiously live in the midst of their stores. There was a little cooking stove in it. There were beds. There was, indeed, no table, but there were boxes that served as seats and as tables, and the lap is the natural dinner-table every man and woman is provided with.

When the front of the van was raised so as to shut up the shop for the night, the crimson plush curtains with their gold fringe and tassels concealed the board on which so much trade had been carried on during the day. There was a window at the back that admitted light. The stove gave out heat, and the inmates of the travelling shop settled themselves to their accounts, and then to rest.

The accounts were calculated not in a ledger, but on their fingers, and balanced not on paper but in their heads.

When darkness set in, then a lamp illumined the interior, and the little dwelling was suffused with a fragrance of fried onions and liver, or roast mutton chops—something appetising and well earned; something for which the public had that day paid, and paid through its nose. The horse had been attended to, and then the father sat on a bench, pipe in mouth and legs stretched out, and occasionally removed the pipe that he might inhale the fumes of the supper his daughter was preparing. Cheap Jack had possessed a fund of good spirits, and his good humour was never ruffled. He had been the kindest of fathers; never put out by a mishap, never depressed by a bad day's trade, never without his droll story, song, or joke. But for a fortnight before his death he had failed in cheeriness and flagged in conversation. The work of the day had become a burden instead

of a pleasure, and had left him so weary that he could often not eat his supper or relish his pipe.

He had combated his declining health, and endeavoured to disguise the advance of disease from the eyes of Zita. But love has keen sight, and she had noted with heartache his gradual failure of spirits and power. Till then no thought as to her own future had occupied her mind. Now that the dear father was gone, Zita had no one on whom to lean. No other head than her own would busy itself about her prospects, no other heart than her own concern itself about her to-morrow.

She was kindly treated at Prickwillow. The van was placed under cover, and the horse provided with a stall.

The housekeeper, a distant relative of Ki Drownlands, was hearty in her offers of assistance, and the maid-of-all-work, who was afflicted with St. Vitus' dance, nodded her kindly good wishes. Both Drownlands and the housekeeper had urged Zita to accept the accommodation of the house, in which were many rooms and beds, but she had declined the invitation; she was accustomed to van life, and could make herself comfortable in her wonted quarters. She needed little, and the van was supplied with most things that she required. There were in it even sufficient black odds and ends to serve her for mourning at her father's funeral. What was there not in the van? It was an epitome of the

world, it was a universal mart, a Novgorod Fair sublimated to an essence.

'What are you about?' asked Drownlands.

He had come into the yard behind the farm-house, and he saw Zita engaged in harnessing the horse. The front was down, and on it stood a milk-strainer, some blacking-brushes, and a flail.

'What are you about? Whither are you going?'

Drownlands was a tall man, with a face like a hawk, and dark bushy brows that stood out over his eyes and the root of his nose.

'I am going,' answered Zita.

'Going? Who told you to go?'

'I am going to be an inconvenience no longer.'

'Who told you you were an inconvenience?'

'No one, but I know that I am not wanted. I thank you for what you have done, and will pay you.'

'Pay me? Who said a word about payment?'

'No one, but of course I pay. Mark Runham —I think that was his name—was kind to me, —that is to say, he spoke civil to me,—and I'm going to pay him for good words with a milk-strainer. You have done me good deeds, and I will pay you. Get into the van and pick out what you like up to five pounds. Do you want door-mats? There's a roll o' carpet, but I don't recommend it, and there's tinned goods.'

Drownlands stared at the girl. Then his eyes rested on the flail.

'What have you got that for? It was in my house.'

'Yes. You took it in. But it is not yours. It belongs to Mark Runham. His father bought it of us. He gave a guinea for it. I picked it up on the bank when I overtook you. You had your flail in your hand. You would have ridden on and left me and my father in the lurch, but I stood in the way with that flail. It is not mine. I have the guinea I received for it in my purse. Now that the old man is dead, for certain it belongs to his son. That is why I am taking it to him.'

'He shall not have it! He must not have it!' exclaimed Drownlands. 'How came you to know Mark Runham?'

'The young man walked from his father's funeral. So did I. He walked the fastest, and he caught me up. He spoke kindly, and so I shall pay him for it with a milk-strainer, or, if he prefers it, with blacking-brushes.'

'Give him the blacking-brushes, by all means.'

'Or the milk-strainer?'

'Or the milk-strainer; but not the flail.'

'It is his,' said Zita. 'The old man paid down his money for it.'

'Give him back the money, not the flail. Here'—

Drownlands thrust his hand into his pocket, and drew a handful of money, gold, silver, copper, mixed, from it, and extended it to the girl.

'Here! you said you would pay me for what I have done. Pay me with the flail. I want nothing more. Then I have the pair; or if you wish to restore the guinea—take it.'

'The flail was bought. It is no longer mine.'

Drownlands stamped, put out his hand and snatched the flail from the board on which it stood.

'He shall not have it. I will accept nothing else.'

'Then I must give the young man its value —a guinea's worth of goods.'

'Do so, and take the pay from me.'

'I will let him have your mats, and I'll tell him that you'—

'Tell him nothing. Not a word about the flail. That is all I ask of you. Say nothing. If you owe me anything for what I have done for your father and you, then pay me by your silence.' He mused for a moment, then caught the girl by the arm and drew her after him. 'Come and see all I have.'

He led her athwart the rickyard to where were ranged his stacks of wheat—two, each forty paces long, with a lane between them. Down this lane he conducted her. 'Look,' said he, 'did you ever see such ricks as these? No, nowhere out of the Fens. Do you know how much bread is in them? No, nor I. It would take you many years to eat your way through them; and every year fresh wheat—as much as

this—grows. There are rats and mice in these stacks. They sit therein and eat their fill, they rear their families there. What odds is that to me? A few more rats and mice—a few more mouths in the house—I care not. There is plenty for all.' Then he drew Zita into another yard that was full of young stock, bullocks and heifers.

'Look here,' said he. 'Do you see all these? How much meat is on them? How long would it take you to eat them? Whilst you were eating, others would be coming — that is the way of Nature. Nature outstrips us; it shovels in with both hands, whilst we take out with one—so is it, anyhow, in the Fens. What is another cut off a round of beef to such as me?'

Then he strode to the stables, threw open the door, and said, 'There are stalls for horses; there is hay in the loft to feed them, oats in the bins to nourish them. What odds to me if there be one more horse in the stalls? Here!' he called to one of his men. 'Take the Cheap Jack horse out of the van-shafts again and bring him to this stable.'

Zita endeavoured to free herself from his grasp.

'No,' said Drownlands; 'you have not seen all. You have been about the world, I dare-say; seen plenty of sights; but there is one thing you have not seen before, — a fen-farm, —and it is a sight to unseal your eyes. Come along with me.'

He held her wrist with the grip of a vice, and now drew her in the direction of the kitchen.

'Look!' said he. 'What is that? That is our fuel. That is turf. What do we pay for keeping ourselves warm in winter? Nothing. I have heard say that some folks pay a pound and even forty shillings for a ton of sea-coal. And for wood they will pay a guinea a load. We pay nothing. The fuel lies under our feet. We take off a spit of earth, and there it is for the digging, some ten—fifteen—twenty feet of it. It costs us no more than the labour of taking up. Do I want a bit of brass? I go to market, and say I have ten acres of turf to sell at sixty pounds an acre. A dozen hands are held up. I get six hundred pounds at once. That is what I call making money. Come on. You have not seen all yet.'

He drew her farther. He pulled her up the steps to the door, then turned, and, pointing to a large field in which were mounds of clay at short intervals, he said—

'Do you see that? What is done elsewhere when land is hungry, and demands a dressing? Lime is brought to fertilise the exhausted soil. We in the Fens never spend a shilling thus. If we desire dressing, we dig under the turf, and there it lies—rich, fat clay—and spread that over the surface. That is what it is to have a fen-farm. Come within now.'

He conducted Zita through the door, and threw open the dairy.

'Look,' said he. 'See the milk, the churns, the butter. Everything comes to us in the Fens. Butter is a shilling a pound, and there are twenty-eight pounds there now. There will be as much next churning, and all goes as fast as made. Touch that churn. Every time you work it you churn money. Come on with me farther.'

He made the girl ascend the stairs, and as he went along the passage at the head of the staircase, he threw open door after door.

'Look in. There are many rooms; not half of them are occupied, but all are furnished. Why should I stint furniture? I have money —money! See!' He drew her into a small apartment, where were desk and table and chairs. It was his office. He unlocked a safe in the wall.

'See! I have money here—all gold. Come to the window.'

Drownlands threw open the casement. Below was the yard, in which were the young cattle, trampling on straw and treading it into mire. He thrust his hand into his pocket, drew forth a handful of coins, and, without looking what he held,—whether gold, or silver, or copper,—he threw it broadcast over the bullocks and heifers. Some coins struck the backs of the beasts, and bounded off them and fell among

the straw, some went down into the mud, and was kneaded in by their feet.

'What is money to me? It grows, it forces itself on me, and I know not what to do with it. I can throw it away to free myself of the trash and more comes. It comes faster than I can use it; faster than I can cast it away. Now, girl—Cheap Jack girl—now you know what a fen-farm is. Now you see what a fen-tiger can do. You remain at Prickwillow with me. I will shelter you, feed you, clothe you, care for you. Eat, drink, sleep, laugh, and play. Work a little. All is given to you ungrudgingly.'

He put the flail to his knee and endeavoured to break it, but failed. Then he cast it into the corner of the room, where was a collection of whips, sticks, and tools.

'There,' said he, 'all I ask is—not a word about my having been on the embankment. Not a word about the flail—least of all to Runham. I have my reasons, which you do not understand, and which you need not know.'

Zita hesitated. She had not expected such an offer. She doubted whether she could contentedly settle into farm life.

'You were about to leave,' continued Drownlands, 'or rather to try to leave. But how could that horse of yours draw the van out of the Fens? You know how it was when you came this way. The wheels sank, and the horse was powerless. I sent my team, and only so could

we draw the van along. Never, unassisted, could you reach Littleport or Ely, not, at all events, in winter. When you got into the drove the wheels would sink again, and I should send my team and drag the van back here once more. You have got your feet into the peat earth and clay, and are held fast. Listen to me. Supposing you did get a little way and then stick, and I were angry at your departure, and refused to come to your aid and draw you back to Prickwillow, what then? Let me tell you what would happen were you left out all night unprotected, sunk to the axle in the fen. There are slodgers in the fen; there are tigers, as they call them here—plenty round Littleport. That story of the sale of the flails is spread and talked about. It is known that you have money. It is known that your father is dead. Do you think there are not men who, for the sake of what money you have, would not scruple to steal on you in the dark, to come up like rats out of the dykes, like foxes from the holes, and take your money, and nip that brown throat of yours to prevent peaching? If you think there are not, then you think differently of the Fens and the fen-men than do I who have lived in the Fens and among the tigers all my days. Come'—

He put his hand to her throat and pinched it.

'This, and your body found in a drain, black

in fen-water, of a morning. This on one side; on the other, my offer of a home, protection—everything.'

Zita withdrew from his grasp with a shudder.

'I accept your offer,' she said; 'I can do no other. There is no choice in the matter.'

'You are right there,' said he, with a laugh. 'To you there is no choice.'

CHAPTER X.

RED WINGS.

DAYS passed; Zita had settled into Prickwillow. She was given her own room, and into that she removed the contents of the van. The walls were lined with the stock in trade, and the crimson and gold curtains festooned the window.

A chamber in a farmhouse seemed to Zita bare and comfortless after the well-covered interior of the shop on wheels. She could not rest till she had hidden the naked walls, and brought her room into some resemblance to the interior of the rolling house she had inhabited for so many years. But she had further reasons for accumulating the stores in her own apartment. The van was in an outhouse, and was exposed to damp, with its attendant evils, moth, rust, and mildew, that would make havoc of her property if exposed to them.

Zita made herself useful in the house. She considered that she could not accept the offer

made her of shelter and sustenance without acknowledgment of a practical nature, and as she was endowed with energy and intelligence, she speedily adapted herself to the work of a farmhouse. She found that there was need for her hand. The housekeeper was without system, and disposed to abandon to the morrow whatever did not exact immediate attention. The maid with St. Vitus' dance was a worker, but required direction. Zita had been compelled to be tidy through the exigencies of van life. In the travelling shop a vast number of very various goods had to be packed into a small compass, and the claims of trade had obliged her to keep every article in the brightest condition, that it might look its best, and sell—if possible—for more than its intrinsic value. Accordingly, not only did Zita see that everything was in its place, but also that everything was furbished to its brightest. She was nimble with her fingers in plying the needle, and took in hand the household linen, hemmed the sheets, attached buttons, darned holes, and put into condition all that was previously neglected, and through neglect had become ragged, and was falling to premature decomposition.

The girl noticed that Drownlands watched her at her work, but she also saw that he averted his eyes the moment she gave token that she perceived his observation; she was aware, not only that she interested him, but

that he, in a manner and in a measure, feared her.

She had a difficult course to steer with Leehanna Tunkiss, the housekeeper, who had received the tidings that Zita was to become an inmate of the house for some length of time, with doubt, if not disapproval. The woman, moreover, resented the improvements made by the girl as so many insults offered to herself. To hem what had been left ragged was to proclaim to Drownlands and to the quaking helpmaid, that Leehanna had neglected her duty; to sew on a button that had been off the master's coat for a week, was to exhibit a consideration for his interests superior to her own.

At the outset, before the funeral, the woman had been gracious, believing that Zita was but a temporary lodger. When she found that she was likely to become a permanent resident, her manner towards her completely altered.

One afternoon, when Zita had nothing particular to engage her, she wandered along the drove, and then rambled from it across the fields.

A frost had set in on the day of her father's funeral, and had ever since held the earth in fetters. It was one of those severe frosts that so often arrive in November, and sweep away the last traces of summer, clear the trees of the lingering leaves, and then sere the grass that is still green.

It was one of those early frosts which frequently prove as severe as any that come with the New Year. The clods and the ruts of the drove were rigid as iron. It would have been difficult to move the van when the way was a slough, it was impossible now that it was congealed. The lumps and the depressions were such as no springs could stand, and no goods endure. Pots would be shivered to atoms, and pans be battered out of shape. Whatever Zita may have desired, perhaps hoped, she recognised the impossibility of leaving her present quarters under existing circumstances. A thaw must relax the soil, harrows and rollers must be brought over the road, before a wheeled conveyance could pass over it. Finding it difficult, painful even, to walk in the drove, where there was not a level surface on which the foot could be planted, Zita deserted it for a field, and then struck across country towards a mill, the sails of which, of ochre-red, were revolving rapidly. The fields are divided, one from another, by lanes of water. The fen-men all leap, and pass from field to field by bounds —sometimes making use of leaping-poles. With these latter they can clear not the ditches only, but the broad drains or loads.

Zita was curious to see a mill. From one point she counted thirty-six, stretching away in lines to the horizon. She had hitherto known windmills only for grinding corn. Here the

number was too considerable, and their dimensions too inconsiderable, for such a purpose.

Lightly leaping the dykes, she made her way towards the red-winged mill. As she approached, she saw that the mill was larger than the rest, that it had a tuft of willows growing beside it, and that, on an elevated brick platform, whereon it was planted, stood as well a small house, constructed, like the mill, of boards, and tarred. This habitation was a single storey high, and consisted, apparently, of one room.

On the approach of Zita, a black dog, standing on the platform with head projected, began to bark threateningly. Zita drew near notwithstanding, as the brute did not run at her, but contented itself with protecting the platform, access to which it was prepared to dispute.

Then Zita exclaimed, 'What, Wolf! Don't you know me? Haven't you been cheap-jacking with us for a couple of months, since father took you off the knife-swallowing man? We'd have kept you, old boy, but didn't want to have to pay tax for you, so sold you, Wolf.'

The dog had not at first recognised Zita in her black frock; now, at the sound of her voice, it bounded to her and fawned on her.

A girl now came out from the habitation, called, 'What is it, Wolf?' and stood at the head of the steps that led to her habitation, awaiting Zita.

'Who are you?' asked the girl on the platform,

She was a sturdy, handsome young woman, with fair hair, that blew about her forehead in the strong east wind. Over the back of her head was a blue kerchief tied under her chin, restraining the bulk of her hair, but leaving the front strands to be tossed and played with by the breeze. She was, in fact, that Kainie whose acquaintance we have already made.

'I believe that I know who you are,' she said.

She had folded her arms, and was contemplating her visitor from the vantage-ground of the brick pedestal that sustained mill and cot. 'You are the Cheap Jack girl, I suppose?'

'Yes. I am Cheap Jack Zita. And who are you?'

'I — I was christened Kerenhappuch, but some folks call me Kainie and Kenappuch. I answer to all three names. It's no odds to me which is used. What do you want here?'

'I have come to look at the mill. What is its purpose? You do not grind corn?'

'Grind corn? You're a zany. No; we drive the water up out of the dykes into the drains. Come and see. Why, heart alive! where have you been? What a fool you must be not to know what a mill is for! Step up. Wolf won't bite now he has recognised you. If you'd been some one else, and tried to step up here, and me not given the word to lie still, he'd have made ribbons of you.' She waved her arms towards the low wooden habitation. 'I

lives there, I does, and so did my mother afore me. Some one must mind the mill, and a woman comes cheaper than a man. Besides, it ain't enough work for a man, and when a man hasn't got enough work, why, he takes to smoking and drinking. We women is different; we does knitting and washing. We's superior animals in that way, we is. Here I am a stick-at-home. I go nowhere. I have to mind the mill. You are a rambler and a roll-about—never in one place. It's curious our coming to know one another. What is your name, did you say?'

'Zita—Cheap Jack Zita.'

'Zita? That's short enough. No wonder with such a name you're blowed about light as a feather. It'd take a thundering gale to send Kerenhappuch flying along over the face of the land. Her name is enough to weight her. Now, what do you want to see? Where does your ignorance begin?'

'It begins in plain blank. I know nothing about mills.'

'My mill is Red Wings. If you look along the line to Mildenhall and count ten, then you'll see Black Wings. Count eight more, and you have White Wings.'

The girl threw open a door and entered the fabric of the mill, stepping over a board set edgewise. She was followed by Zita.

Nothing could be conceived more simple,

nothing more practical, than the mechanism of the mill. The sails set a mighty axletree in motion, that ran the height of the fabric, and this beam in its revolution turned a wheel at the bottom, that made a paddle revolve outside the mill. This paddle was encased in a box of boards, and at first Zita could not understand the purpose of the mechanism, not seeing the paddle.

'Would you like to climb?' asked Kainie. 'Look! I go up like a squirrel. You had best not attempt it. If your skirts were to catch in the cogs, there'd be minced Cheap Jack for Wolf's supper. I'm not afraid. My skirts seem to know not to go near the wheels, but yours haven't the same intelligence in them. A woman's clothes gets to know her ways. Mine, I daresay, 'd be terrible puzzled in that van of yours.'

'Don't you talk to me about petticoats,' said Zita. 'Petticoats to a woman is what whiskers is to a cat. They have feeling in them. A cat never knocked over nothing with his whiskers, nor does a woman with her skirts if she ain't a weaker fool than a cat.'

Then up the interior of the mill ran Kainie, with wondrous agility, playing in the framework, whilst the huge axletree turned, and the oak fangs threatened to catch or drag her into the machinery.

'Do come down,' said Zita. 'I do not like to see you there.'

But it was in vain that she called; her voice was drowned in the rush of the sails, the grinding of the cogs, and the creak of the wooden building.

Presently Kainie descended, as rapidly as she had run up the ribs of the mill.

'Mother did not let me do it when she was alive,' said the mill girl. 'But I did it all the same. Now, what next? Come and see this.'

She led Zita outside, and took her to the paddle-box, flung open a door in it, and exposed the wheel that was throwing the water from the 'dyke' up an incline into the 'load' at a considerably higher level.

'It licks up the water just like Wolf, only it don't swallow it. There's the difference. And Wolf takes a little, and stops when he's had enough; but this goes on, and its tongue is never dry.'

'Does the mill work night and day?'

'That depends. When there's no wind, then it works neither night nor day, but goes to sleep. But when there has been a lot of rain, and the fen is all of a soak—why, then, old Red Wings can't go fast enough or long enough to please the Commissioners. Look here; the water has gone down eighteen inches in the dyke since this morning. Red Wings has done it. He's not a bad sort of a chap. He don't take much looking after. There's a lot of difference in mills; some are crabbed and fidgety, and some

are sly and lazy. Some work on honest and straight without much looking after, others are never doing their work unless you stand over them and give them jaw. It's just the same with Christians.'

'And what is that long pole for?' asked Zita.

'That, Miss Ignorance, is the clog. I can stop the wings from going round if I handle that, or I can set the sails flying when I lift the clog. Come here. I'll teach you how to manage it.' She instructed Zita in the use of the clog. 'There!' said she; 'now you can start the mill as well as I can, or you can stop it just the same. You've learned something from me to-day. I hope you won't forget it.'

'No; I never forget what I am taught.'

'Not that it will be of any use to you,' said Kainie. 'You're never like to want to set a mill going.'

'Perhaps not; but I know how to do that, and it is something. There is no telling whether I may want it or not.'

'It's as easy as giving a whack to the hoss who draws the van,' said Kainie.

'Now,' said Kainie, after a pause, 'this here hoss of mine has reins too. Do you see those two long poles, one on either side, reaching to his head? Them's the reins; with them I turn his head about so that he may face the wind. That's the only way in which my hoss can go. Now come and see where I live.'

She led the way to her habitation, which was beyond the sweep of the wings.

'It's small, but cosy,' said Kerenhappuch. 'No one can interfere with me, for Wolf keeps guard. But, bless you, who'd trouble me? I've no money. And yet one does feel queer after such things as have happened.'

'What things?'

'Ah! and it is a wonder to me how you or any one can abide in the same house with him.'

'With whom?'

'Why, with Ki Drownlands. Though he be my uncle, I say it.' The girl's face darkened. 'He never spoke to my mother, his own sister; never helped her with his gold, and he rich and we poor. The Commissioners gave us our place, not Uncle Drownlands.'

'Who are the Commissioners?'

'You are a silly not to know. Every man who owns a couple of score acres in the Fens is a Commissioner. And the Commissioners manage the draining, and levy the rates. They have their gangers, their bankers, their millers —I'm one of their millers. No,' said Kainie vehemently. 'No thanks to Ki Drownlands for that.' She grasped Zita by the shoulders, put her mouth to her ear, and said in a half whisper, 'It was Uncle Ki who killed Jake Runham.'

Zita drew back and stared at her.

'I am sure of it,' said Kainie; 'and there be others as think so too, but durstn't say it. But there is nothing hid that shall not come to light. Some day it will be said openly, and known to all, that Ki Drownlands did it.'

CHAPTER XI.

TIGER-HAIR.

ZITA walked back in the direction of Prickwillow with a weight on her heart and her mind ill at ease. Incidents half observed rose in her memory and demanded consideration—as in a pool sunken leaves will rise after a lapse of time and float on the surface. Facts that had been indistinctly seen and scarce regarded, now assumed shape and significance.

She recalled the incidents of the night of her father's death, and marshalled them in order with that nicety and precision that marked her arrangement of the goods in the van. She remembered how that she had seen two men ride along the bank, one after another, with an interval of some minutes intervening between them, as they passed above where she had been with the van and her father. The first rider had been furnished with two lanterns to his feet. She had let him pass without attempting to arrest him. That man she now knew was

Hezekiah Drownlands. Then, after a lapse of some minutes, a second rider had passed, going in the same direction. He had carried a single lantern attached to his left stirrup. To him she had run, him she had brought to a standstill, and she had asked and been refused his assistance. That man was Jeremiah Runham.

Zita next recalled every particular of her run along the bank after the second rider. She now distinctly remembered having seen a glitter of several lights before her, a cluster of lights leaping and falling, flashing and disappearing. How many these had been she could not recall. They had changed position, they were not all visible at once. At the time, in her distress of mind, she had not counted them. But she was now convinced that the lights which she had seen, and seen in one constellation, had been more than two. A single star would have represented Runham. Two stars would have indicated Drownlands. More than two—that showed that the men had been together. Further, she had heard shouts and cries. At the time, as she ran, she had supposed that these were in response to her appeals for assistance; but when she had reached Drownlands, the only man on the bank she did come upon, then, as she now recalled, he was startled at her appearance, as if it were wholly unexpected. He could not, therefore, have called in answer

to her cries. But where was the third light? What had become of Runham?

When she had reached Drownlands no third light was visible, whereas a minute previously there had certainly been more than two before her. What had become of the second rider?

It was, of course, conceivable at the time that the third light had been extinguished, and the second rider was in full career along the bank in the direction he desired to go. But such an explanation was no longer admissible when it was known that this rider was dead, and had been drowned in the river. When Zita considered that this rider, Runham, had been found in the water, with the light of life as well as that of his lantern extinguished, and when she remembered that she had picked up the flail he had been carrying at the spot where she came up with Drownlands, it appeared certain to her that Drownlands must have witnessed, if he did not cause, the death of Runham. It was possible that Runham, returning tipsy from market, may have urged his horse on one side, so as to pass the man before him, and so have plunged into the river; and it was possible enough that Drownlands had chosen to maintain silence on the matter, lest any admissions on his part might have been construed into an accusation of having caused the death of his adversary.

Zita was turning these thoughts over in her

mind when she reached the embankment. She started to walk along it. She was confident that she could fix the spot where she had slipped into the water, and that was but about a hundred paces from where she had come up with Drownlands. She remembered to have observed there a post in the water that had in it a mortice-hole, like an eye, and that the head was so indented and rugged as at one moment to make her suppose it was a human face.

As has already been stated, there had been sufficient frost to harden mud into rock. Traces of a scuffle—if a scuffle had taken place—would be recognisable still to an eye that knew precisely where to look for them.

Zita went with nimble feet, a busy brain, and fluttering heart towards the point where the van had been arrested in the mud, and she resolved thence to follow the course she had taken on that eventful night along the bank. On this occasion she walked deliberately where she had previously run, and came after a while to the spot where, according to her calculation, she had slipped into the canal. There she found the post standing up out of the water to which she had clung, close to the bank, with the mortice-hole in it that had looked so like a human eye. This was the only post of the kind she had come across, and this was not more than a hundred yards from the spot where she had

grasped Drownlands' foot, had held him, and had heard him scream at her touch.

At this point, some hundred yards beyond the post with the hole in it, she carefully explored the soil. The top of the embankment was indented with hoof-marks, but these might have been made by the gangers' horses, which were constantly driven up and down the embankment. But there was something that satisfied the girl that at this spot a struggle had taken place, for on the land side of the embankment tufts of grass and clods of clay had been torn out and thrown into the drove, and on the water side hoof-marks and a slide in the greasy marl were sealed up by the frost as evidences of a horse having there gone down into the water. These had not been observed by any one else, as no one save Zita had known the exact place where to look for them, and though distinguishable enough when searched for, they were not obtrusively manifest.

Zita had not merely a well-arranged mind, but she was able to prize whatever facts came before her at their true value.

Now, as she walked away from the river towards Prickwillow, she realised that there was strong presumptive evidence that Drownlands had been engaged in a tussle with his enemy, and that he knew how it was that Runham had met his death, even if he were not absolutely his murderer.

As Zita entered the house, she heard the master's voice raised in tones of anger. He was addressing Mrs. Tunkiss, the housekeeper.

'It's all idle excuse—you don't want the trouble of it. I know your ways.'

'I haven't a needle will go through it,' answered Leehanna.

Then Drownlands came out of the kitchen. He was swinging in his hand the tiger-skin that usually in cold or wet weather was slung over his shoulders. His eye lighted on Zita, and his face brightened at once.

'Look here, you Cheap Jack girl,' said he. 'The servants are idle curs, both of them. I want Leehanna Tunkiss to mend my skin. I have torn it. A few threads will suffice, and she declares she has no needle that will go through the leather. It's all idleness and excuse.'

'I will do it,' said Zita. 'We have all sizes and sorts of needles in stock—for cobblers, tailors, and all.'

She took the tiger-hide out of his hand.

'That's my greatcoat — my mantle by day and my rug and coverlet by night,' said Drownlands. 'I wear no other. We, who have been born and bred in the Fens, folk are pleased to call fen-tigers. That is why I got this skin. Ten, fifteen years ago it was for sale in Ely, and I bought it as a fancy, and have come to think I can't do without it. Folks have got to

know me now by it, and call me the Fen-tiger King. Can you mend it?'

Turning the skin about, Zita said, 'It has been given a wrench—tremenjous.'

'Well, so it has, and there is a rip as well. If it is not drawn together now, it will go worse. I don't want to wear rags, and I won't, that's more — though Leehanna would have me, to save trouble. It is easier to find an excuse than to run threads with a needle.'

'I will do it,' said Zita. 'But you must suffer me to take it to my room, that I may find a suitable needle and stout thread.'

'Yes, take it,' said Drownlands, with his beetling brows drawn together and his eyes fixed on her from below them. 'Yes, Chestnut-hair! you can do everything. In your store you keep everything but excuses.'

'We could not sell them,' said Zita.

'And it is with excuses Leehanna serves me,' he replied, and looked sideways angrily at his housekeeper, who retreated muttering into the kitchen.

Then Drownlands went out, and Zita retired to her room to accomplish the task she had undertaken. As she turned the hide about, she was struck with the evidence it gave of having been wrenched and twisted with great strain of violence. The wrench was no ordinary one, produced by the catching of the skin in a nail or door. The hide was in one place stretched

out of shape by the force exerted on it; not only so, but it had been contorted. Again, on closer investigation, it appeared that some of the hair had been ripped out by the roots, by this means exposing the bare hide.

As Zita worked at the repair, her busy brain occupied itself with the causes of this strain and rent: how they could have been produced, why the tension had been so excessive.

That Drownlands had not ridden to Ely on the fair-day with his skin torn she was convinced by his asking to have it mended now; whereas, had it been in this condition before fair-day, he would have required it to be repaired before riding into Ely. Drownlands was eccentric in his dress, but he was also punctilious about its neatness. The injury done to the tiger-skin must have been done since Tawdry fair-day. All at once Zita dropped needle and twine, started up, left her room, and went to that which Drownlands used as his office, the apartment into which he had conducted her when he showed her his money.

Into the corner of this room he had flung the flail that he had taken from her when she was about to leave his farm and to return it to Mark Runham; the flail she had picked up on the bank was that Runham the elder had bought from her for a guinea.

Zita knew that Drownlands was out, she had seen him go to the stables across the yard.

He had not returned. She had not heard his voice or step in the house since. Into the office she was justified in penetrating, for the master had asked her to keep it in order for him. Leehanna Tunkiss neglected it, on the excuse that she was afraid of disarranging his papers and books. Zita knew that both flails were in this room; that which Drownlands had bought was suspended to a nail, the other was in the corner where he had cast it.

Zita took both flails and examined them. She saw that they had been subjected to rough usage. The wood was bruised in both. It had not been so when they left her hands in the afternoon of Tawdry Fair. The flappers were dinted, and there was a deep bruise in the 'handfast' of one. Both had been employed to strike, and both had clashed against each other.

Zita replaced Drownlands' flail on the nail whence she had unhitched it, and took a further look at that which had belonged to Runham.

She now observed that the leather thongs that attached the flapper to the handfast were twisted, stretched, and strained, and that in the twist was a tuft of hair precisely similar to that of the tiger-skin.

She detached some of this hair, took it to her room, and compared it with that still in place on the hide. There could no longer be any question but that a struggle had taken place between the two men, that they had fought

with the flails, that in course of the contest the flail of Runham had become entangled in the hide worn by Drownlands, and that the flail had been twisted, and so had strained and torn the skin.

In this case Drownlands most certainly knew of the death of his adversary, and had had some hand in it.

Zita knew enough, and she shuddered at the thought that she was enjoying the hospitality of a murderer.

CHAPTER XII.

ON BONE RUNNERS.

'HEIGH! Cheap Jack girl!'

Zita was out enjoying the crisp, frosty air, on the frozen soil, sparkling under the winter sun.

The November frost had continued, and canals and rivers were iced over as well as dykes and drains. God's plough was in the soil—that is what country folk say when the frost cuts deep into the earth. Where God's plough has been, there golden harvests are turned up to gladden all sorts and conditions of men, and golden harvests turn to metallic gold in the pockets of the farmers.

Every fen man, woman, and child can skate. As soon as a child has found its legs, it essays to slide, and when it can slide, it attempts to skate. Fen skating is inelegant. Speed alone is considered, and legs and arms fly about in all directions. With scorn does the fen-man contemplate the figuring of the fine gentleman on the ice.

In winter, skating matches come as thick as do football matches elsewhere. Parish is pitted against parish, fen against fen, islet contests with islet; even the frequenters of one tavern are matched against the frequenters of another.

During a hard frost, locomotion for once becomes easy and speedy in the Fens. Men and women skate to market, children to school, and smugglers run their goods from King's Lynn.

Zita had gone to the river side to see a sight that was novel to her. As she stood watching the skaters, Mark Runham came to the bank side, his cheeks glowing, his fair hair blowing about his ears, his eyes sparkling as though frost crystals were in them.

'I say, Cheap Jack, get on your patines and come.' Skates are termed *patines* in the Fens.

'If you mean skates, I have none. Besides, I do not know how to use them.'

'Not got patines? Not know how to use them? Then take a ride in my sleigh. I'll run you along. Stay here a few minutes till I have brought it.'

He was gone, flying down the river like a swallow, and in ten minutes he had returned, drawing after him a little sledge, and stayed his course on the frozen surface of the Lark before Zita.

'It's fine fun,' said he, with a voice cheery as his smile. 'I'll run you where you like to go; to Rossall Pits if you will—to Littleport—down

to the sea—up to Cambridge—to the end of the world—anywhere you will.'

'Take me for a short distance only.'

'Then seat yourself in the sledge. We shall go as the wind.'

Zita descended the bank to the ice.

'Look!' said he; 'do you see how my sleigh is made? It is set on the leg-bones of a horse. It runs on them in prime style. They wear as steel, and slip along better.'

With her face radiant with happiness, Zita placed herself in the little sleigh.

Then with a merry 'Whoop!' off he started down the river. The wind rushed in Zita's face, sharp and fresh, and drove the blood to her cheeks.

They passed many 'patiners,' men and boys. There were few women out. Later, when the sun set, they would skate along the frozen surface to the tavern. The tavern is an institution in the Fens more frequented than elsewhere, and frequented without scruple, not by men only, but by women as well. There is a reason for this. The fen-water is undrinkable. There are no springs in the Fens. Those who live near the rivers derive thence their tea water; river water is potable and harmless when boiled, that which is drawn from the peat is neither. Consequently the inhabitants of the Fens are compelled to drink something other than water, and instinctively seek that something other at

the public-houses. When the woman's work-day is over, she dons her patines and is off to the 'Fish and Duck,' or the 'Spade and Becket,' the 'Pike and Eel,' or the 'Sedge Sheaf,' to moisten her dust-dry clay.

As Zita flew along the ice, she laughed for joy of heart. Never had she travelled so fast. Her wonted pace had been that of the snail, for she had made progress in a heavily-laden van, drawn by a depressed and stolid horse. She was whirled past one of the main pumps for throwing the water of the loads into the river, and before she conceived it possible, she had passed a second. And these engines, as Mark told her, were two miles apart. Jewel's fashion of travelling was very different from that of Mark. Along the smoothest and most level road he had been accustomed to crawl, and then, after having made his pulses throb and his sweat break out, to stand still, with head down, to revive himself. Then nothing would induce him to proceed till he considered himself refreshed, when he would stumble on for a couple of miles, and again pause. But Mark flew along as though he would never know exhaustion, and there was no bringing him to a standstill.

After several vain attempts to arrest him, Zita succeeded. He stood beside her sleigh with a smile on his pleasant face, and with the steam blowing from his nostrils.

'You must not go too far,' said Zita. 'We have come a long way from Prickwillow.'

'What! are you tired? You have not been dancing on sketches?'

'I do not understand your meaning.'

'Sketches?—does that word puzzle you as did patines? They are what some folk call stilts. I can run on them like a crane. But sketches are cumbrous, and, when the fen is soft, tire one speedily.'

'Let us return now.'

'No indeed. You have nothing to call you back. That fellow Drownlands, old scoundrel, —I beg your pardon,—will not be angry with you and thrash you, I suppose?'

'He is not at home. He has gone abroad for the day.'

'Then come along. We will visit Newport.'

'Please do not take me much farther.'

'Why not? Are you not enjoying the run?'

'I love it.'

'Then away we go. You are not afraid of travelling, with me as your horse?'

She looked straight into his bright, honest face, and laughed. 'No—you are too good for any one to fear you.'

'How do you know that?'

'You carry honesty in your eyes, and "good boy" written across your brow.'

'It is time for me to run,' laughed Mark, 'or my head will be turned.'

He buckled himself to his task, pranced from side to side, swinging the little sleigh to right and left, in his light-hearted frolic, and then away he went, running the sleigh with Zita in it straight along the canal.

The flatness, the monotony of the Fens, the absence of unshackled nature, the treelessness of the region, the lack of everything that can arrest the changing lights and passing shadows, combine to make the district one to send a chill into the mind of the visitor. Flat as the sea, it is devoid of its diversity of tint and tumultuous or glassy beauty. Nevertheless, the fen exercises a charm over the mind and holds with a spell the heart of the native. He can live nowhere else. He will not emigrate. He feels bound to spend all his days in the fen. Only when the vital spark expires does his body leave the turf to repose in the clay of the islet graveyards. That the farmer and landowner should love the fen is not marvellous, because of the richness of the soil and the profits they make out of it; but why the labourer should cling to the spongy turf is not so explicable. He may be discontented, and be a grumbler, but he is discontented with his lot, and envies the taverner or the smuggler on the Fens, grumbles at the hardness of his work or the lowness of his pay; but he is not discontented because the fen is so flat, and he has no word against its hideousness, or, at least, its uniformity.

One reason why the labourer in the Fens does not think of leaving it may be that he uses tools there different from those employed elsewhere, and he would have to learn his trade anew, employ unfamiliar tools, and be subjected to ridicule when handling them awkwardly. It is strange, but true, that those men are more naturally prone to leave their homes who inhabit mountainous lands than such as dwell in level districts.

How far was Mark going? How Zita flashed past the windmills, some of which had their sails in motion! A little rising ground showed, with some trees clustered on it—that must be Littleport.

'Mark,' said Zita suddenly, 'I want to ask you a question.'

'Say on,' said he, and relaxed the speed at which he was spinning her along, and finally came to a standstill. How pretty she was, with her glowing cheeks, her cherry lips, the light of the winter sun in her soft hazel eyes and in her rich, burnished, chestnut hair! How pretty that hair was now, in some confusion, puffed out of its order, the coppery strands on her brow, one down her cheek! The wildness of her appearance thus untidied by the wind made her more than ever charming.

Mark looked with eyes that could not be satiated with looking.

But it was not merely her beauty that struck

him. It was the exuberant happiness that seemed to be bursting forth at her eyes, running out of her little head in every shining hair, glowing in those bright-tinted cheeks, burning in those carnation-red lips.

'Well, my dear little Zita, what is it?'

'Mark, it is something I have thought about and have puzzled over. It seems strange to speak about it now—now when I am so joyous—and it is connected with things so sad to me and to you.'

'But what is it, little rogue?'

'Mark, that terrible night when your father and mine died'— She paused.

'Well, Zita?'

'Then—before his death, I mean—before the death of my own dear daddy, and I can't say whether it was before or after yours was drowned—I heard such a strange, such an awful sound.'

'Where?'

'In the sky—above; like the barking of dogs. It was just as though a hunter was going by with his pack. Shall I tell you what I thought it? It was just as if the dogs had smelt the fox, and gave tongue. Was it not dreadful? I could see nothing; I could hear—that was all.'

'I think nothing of that,' said Mark. 'I know our fen-folk say it is the devils running after a human soul. They have snuffed it from the bottomless pit, then the Great Hunter of Souls

opens the kennel door, and out they burst, yelping, snapping, panting, and come after it.'

'Oh, Mark!'

'But if the soul be very nimble, it runs before them, runs on the wind, swift as an arrow, and slips in at heaven's gate, and then the evil spirits yelp and bay and bark outside. But it is all fudge and nonsense. I believe that the sound comes from the wild geese.'

'I shall ever think of this. Oh, I hope I shall never hear that dreadful sound again. My dear father—no—he would certainly escape those hounds. They would never catch him. For him the Golden Gate would be opened, and the dogs be shut outside. He was so gentle, so kind, so true. Oh, I loved him so—so much!' And thereupon the brightness was gone out of the sunny little face, and it was bathed in tears.

'Put all this aside. Think no more of it.'

'They were in full pursuit when I heard them.'

'The geese? And you are a little goose if you think more of this.'

'Mark, may I never hear that sound again!'

'Or, if you do, Zita, may I be near you to laugh your fears away. No, not laugh—kiss them away, as I do now.'

'Mark! you *are* a naughty boy! I did not think it of you.'

The roses had come back, and the glow was returned, and in one cheek deeper than the other.

CHAPTER XIII.

PIP BEAMISH.

'DO go on and leave me alone,' said Zita.

Then again the young man sped forward with the sledge, at full speed on his skates. There was a glow of something more than health —something more than the reaction produced by the fresh wind— in his cheeks.

'Here's a joke!' exclaimed Mark, stopping for a moment. 'I see quite a throng round Beamish's mill.'

Again he went on. And Zita, looking in the direction he had indicated, saw that a considerable number of persons was collected, some on the banks, some on the ice, and as many as could be accommodated on the brick platform of a windmill.

Without halting, Mark said, 'The paddle can't go because of the frost, but Pip Beamish's tongue can wag, and when it wags it is for mischief. He is a restless, dissatisfied rascal. We'll go and hear what he has to say.'

Mark stayed the sledge when he reached the outer ring of the congregation that was gathered together about the mill.

The day was Sunday, so no work was being done. There were idlers everywhere, specially on the ice. In present days there is little church-going in the Fens, in former days there was none. Churches are few and far apart. In mediæval times the monks of Ely had chapels on every islet that rose a few feet above the meres, and they boated from one to another, gathering around them for divine service and moral instruction the aquatic population of the Fens. With the Reformation these chapels were let fall into ruin, and care for the souls of the fen-dwellers ceased. The canons of the cathedral were wealthy and idle, and it never so much as occurred to their sleepy, stagnant consciences that they had duties to perform towards the inhabitants of the district whence they drew their revenues.

When the meres were dried, and settlers occupied the drained land, then the parochial clergy were unable to cope with the altered condition of affairs. The roads were impassable, the distances enormous, their incomes had not increased with the alteration in the value of the lands included in their vast parishes. Consequently, the fen-folk came to think little of their religious duties. The church towers might serve as landmarks, but the church

pastors were not spiritual guides. The only form of religion that commended itself to an amphibious population was Anabaptism, and that mainly because it consisted of a good souse in fen-water. A few of the sterner spirits settled into the sect, but the bulk of the natives grew up and lived without any religion at all; or, if they professed to be Christians, they took care to allow it in no way to interfere with their profits or their pleasures.

The assemblage about the mill consisted of labouring men and their wives; some were in their Sunday clothes, but others had not taken the trouble to 'clean' themselves. Such were the men who lounged about on holidays with springes and nets in their pockets, and a gun barrel up the left sleeve.

A stool was planted close to the mill, and on it stood a young man with high cheek-bones, long dark hair, and glittering eyes under heavy, bushy brows. He had unusually lengthy arms, and at the extremities of the arms unusually broad, flat hands. These he flourished about. He drew in his elbows to his sides, and emphasised an appeal by suddenly throwing out his arms and extending his fingers. Having his back to the mill, which was constructed of boards, what he said was audible to some distance. The boards served as reverberators.

'I say it is a sin,' shouted the orator. 'Here be the farmers turning earth into corn, and corn

into gold guineas, and the men as helps them to do it ain't paid enough to keep body and soul together. What was wheat a quarter only a short while ago? It was one hundred and twenty shillings and sixpence. Now it is ninety-six shillings. And what are the wages? Seven to ten shillings. What is the difference between seven shillings and ninety-six? Eighty-nine, is it not? That is what goes into the farmers' pockets. Who do all the work? And who get all the gains? Look into every stackyard and see what wheat is there for the rats and mice to eat,—they are not begrudged it, let them eat,—but you and your children must starve. Why are not the stacks threshed out? Because the farmers are waiting till the wheat goes up to one hundred and twenty-six shillings again. You may perish of hunger—that is nothing to them. Your children may run naked—that is nothing to them. You may drink fen-water because you haven't twopence to pay for a half-pint of beer—that is nothing to them. You mayn't have a blanket to throw over your beds this freezing weather—they don't care. You may have the walls of your cots so full of cracks that the wind whistles through them—they don't care. Your hands have held the plough, your hands have sown the corn, your wives and children have hoed it three times, you have reaped it, you have stacked it —and there it stands for rats and mice to eat,

till prices go up to one hundred and twenty-six shillings. Ninety-six is not good enough for them,—these bloodsuckers,—and you are content to let things remain so. What I maintain is, that you have a right to say to the farmers, "Thresh out now while we are hungry; the price is too high even now for us, and why should sad days for us be golden days for you?"'

His address was received with applause.

Mark turned to Zita and said in a low tone, 'He is right after a fashion. I'll set to work and thresh to-morrow. I'll let the labourers who are on my farm have this corn ten per cent. under market price. I cannot act fairer than that.'

'And how is it with the millers?' pursued the orator. 'Don't they take toll of every sack of corn you send to them to be ground? Are not their pigs and cows kept fat on what the miller's fist brings up out of your flour? As if it were not enough that you were cheated by the farmer, you must be cheated also by the miller. Pillaged in every way, pinched on every side, trodden on by every one—that is your fate.'

His words met with applause.

'We have gone on hoping, and we have been disappointed. What good comes to us from Parliament? None at all. What help do we get from the laws? The laws are made for the benefit of the farmer, and not for the poor man.

What good to us are magistrates—justices of the peace? They are appointed to hold us down, to fine and imprison us. They are the farmer's friends, not the friends of the poor man. We are told that Old Boney is the foe of our country. Men are called from the plough, plucked away from their wives and children, to serve the king against this Bonaparte. What does patriotism mean? It means loving the country where we are ill-treated and starved, loving the king who never concerns himself about us, loving the laws that oppress us, loving the magistrates who imprison us, loving the farmers who are sucking the marrow out of our bones. I'm no patriot. As well ask a poor prisoner to love his jail, shed his blood in its defence. I'll tell you what it is, friends, Heaven helps them who help themselves. No good will come to us from waiting. Heaven is silent so long as we bear and do nothing, but Heaven will send its lightning and hailstones when we take the matter into our own hands. It was so in the day of battle in Gibeon; then the Lord cast down great stones from heaven upon the oppressors of Israel, and made sun and moon to stand still till they were cut to pieces, smitten hip and thigh. The great stones would have remained in the clouds, sun and moon have taken their usual courses, had not Joshua and Israel armed themselves to fight—to right their own wrongs. So will it be again,

so has it ever been, so will it be unto the end. We must raise our hands to fight our fight, raise our hands against our oppressors, or there will be no help for us from on high. If you remain hoping and doing nothing, then, as I said before —to be trampled into the mud—that is your fate.'

'And to be thrashed and to be kicked out of employ—that is what is laid up for you, you rascal!' shouted an imperious voice.

Zita and Mark looked round, and saw behind them Drownlands on his horse.

'I will see to you, Pip Beamish, as sure as that I am a Commissioner,' continued the master of Prickwillow. 'You were not set to tend a mill that you might stump it and foment ill-feeling. I shall report what you have said at the next meeting of the Commissioners, and shall have you cast adrift.' Then, turning to the audience, Drownlands brandished his whip and cried, 'As for the rest of you, disperse instantly, or I will ride up and down among you and lash you with my whip, and send you skipping home.'

The crowd broke up into knots, then further dissolved and dispersed.

'I'll have your names, and see that you are thrown out of employ. Get home at once, before the whip is at your breech.'

The haughty, commanding tone of the man, and the knowledge that he was one ready to

execute his threats, seemed to make those who hesitated consider that the better part of valour was discretion, and they scattered in all directions.

Drownlands, upright in his stirrups, looked about him, marking those who seemed reluctant to obey his orders. Then his eye rested on Zita. His face changed immediately.

'You here?'

'Mark ran me up in his sleigh.'

'Mark? Mark? What Mark? How dare you come here without leave from me?'

'I am not your servant. I am not your prisoner. I go where I choose. I do what I will,' answered Zita, nettled at his tone.

'Hallo!' scoffed Drownlands. 'What! has the mad folly of Ephraim Beamish infected your little brain?'

'My brain is sound enough. It is you, Master Drownlands, who forget what your place is, and what is mine. You are not my master. I am not your servant. I pay my way. I am a lodger at Prickwillow, nothing more. If I please to go out for a run on the ice with Mark, I am not idle. I have done my work in your house, and may enjoy myself as I like.'

'Do not bandy words with me.'

'It is of no use arguing with him,' whispered the young yeoman. 'He is in one of his passions, when he acts and talks unreasonably. Take no notice of him.'

'What are you whispering about? Making mock of me?' roared Drownlands.

'Come, Cheap Jack,' said Mark, 'jump on to the sleigh again; and you, Master Drownlands,' he looked at the horseman with a laugh, 'let us race—you on the bank, I on the canal—and Zita the prize.'

CHAPTER XIV.

ON ONE FOOTING.

ZITA was back at Prickwillow long before the master.

She anticipated a scene with him and prepared for it. He was wont to domineer in his house and on the farm, and she had just seen how he domineered and enforced his will on an assemblage of men not under subjection to him.

She was sensible that he had gradually assumed towards herself an air of authority, but he had not hitherto addressed her in a dictatorial tone so distinct as to provoke resistance. She had, however, perceived that the time was approaching when some understanding must be reached as to her position and their mutual relations. She was not a domestic in the house, to be ordered about or to have her liberty curtailed. She had accepted his hospitality, not entered into his service.

Zita was alive to the fact that every one in the house and on the farm—Mrs. Tunkiss, the

shaking maid-of-all-work, the herd, the labourers, the stable-boy—all stood in awe of him. The housekeeper was as a lamb under his reprimand; a word addressed to the girl with St. Vitus' dance drove her into convulsions; an order given to the men galvanised them into momentary agility and sent the boy skipping like a flea. Zita despised them for their subserviency. She was not afraid of Drownlands. She knew that concerning him which was sufficient to make him quake before her.

Zita had been accustomed to face men of every description. Her father had stood between her and coarse insult, but she had been obliged to confront men rude, boisterous, and disposed to take advantage of her weakness, and had acquired readiness in dealing with them, and nerve not to show timidity.

When she had seen the cringe and cower of those whom Drownlands had threatened, she tossed her chestnut gold head in a manner expressive of impatience.

Drownlands had noticed this, and Zita had seen in his darkening brow that he had observed, was surprised and offended at the contemptuous action. The moment was not far off when he would test his strength against hers.

'The sooner the better,' said Zita to herself; and, instead of avoiding him, she went across the yard to meet him as he rode up the drove. She took his horse by the bridle and said, 'I will

lead him to the stable; the men are at chapel or the beerhouse, and the boy is with the cows.'

'You won't curry favour by doing this,' said Drownlands.

'Curry favour? I curry nothing. Currycomb your horse yourself!'

'I want a word with you, Cheap Jack.'

'And I with you, Fen-tiger—we must settle terms.'

'Terms? What terms?'

'The price of my lodging.'

'I do not understand you.'

'I have a capital copper warming-pan,' said Zita, 'with George and the Dragon on the lid. A stunner. I've reckoned up what meat I've ate, and all I've drunk, and the wear and tear of knives, linen, dishes, and so forth, and I think the copper warming-pan will cover it all.'

Drownlands had flung himself from his horse.

He stared at Zita; he did not in the least seize her meaning.

'If you don't care for a warming-pan,' she said, 'then there's half a dozen red plush weskits, with gilded buttons and dogs' heads on 'em—you can't wear all six, but take your choice and I'll make up with scrubbing-brushes, starch, and blue. I think the tiger-skin and a red weskit under it, and them bushy eyebrows tied in a knot as they be now, will make such a figure of you as will drive babies and girls into fits.'

'You are mocking me! You dare to do that?'

'I'm not mocking you, though I don't say I'm not inclined to whisk a red weskit before you, when you stamp and blare like a bull—for fun, you know. I love fun, but I am not mocking you. I am too much obliged to you for receiving me to do that.'

'I will turn you out—you and your van—into the winter frost.'

'When? To-morrow? I am ready to go.'

'You shall not go!' exclaimed Drownlands, coming round the head of the horse to her and seizing her wrist. 'You shall not go; I know why you want to leave me. I know whither you want to go.'

'Whither?'

'To Crumbland.'

'I have not been invited there; but if you turn me out, I shall find a shakedown somewhere. There is that girl Kenappuch at the mill. She'll have me for certain, and I'll pay her; not so high as a warming-pan, but in currants and figs and a roll of calico. The accommodation won't be so good as yours, nor the feeding so liberal.'

'You have got to know her also?'

'Yes.'

'And Mark Runham?'

'Yes; he has got to know me. That's the way to put it.'

'You are resolved to seek friends where I disapprove—among those who are my enemies?'

'I know nothing and care less about your

quarrels. I've got acquainted with both, and they are the only persons in the Fens for whom I care'—

'Oh, you care only for them.'

'Outside Prickwillow. You cut me short before I had finished my sentence. That is bad manners. If we kept manners in stock, I'd sell you a penn'orth.'

'Ah,' said Drownlands, for a moment relaxing his iron grasp, 'you allow me some of your regard?'

'I always care for every one who is kind to me, and you have been kind to both me and my poor father.' At the mention of her father Zita's lips and voice quivered, and tears filled her eyes. 'You were good to him. I do not forget that, and I'll pay you for it in anything I have got that you fancy. What do you say to smoked mother-of-pearl buttons?'

'Will you be quiet?' roared Drownlands, with an oath.

'Or,' continued Zita, 'there are several pounds of strong fish-glue. It went soft and got mouldy in the van, but I got it dry in the kitchen and wiped the mould off. It is all right now; the strength isn't taken out of it. A shilling a pound is what it would cost you in Ely, but as I offer it to you, I'll knock off twopence. You shall have it for tenpence per pound—so you see I do care for you, twopence in the shilling.'

Drownlands' face darkened; he pressed the girl's wrist so that she uttered an exclamation of pain.

'You hurt me,' she said; 'that's something off your account.'

'You are making a jest of me!' gasped the man. 'And you dare to do so? You are not afraid?'

'What should I be afraid of?'

'I can hurt you—worse than by nipping your wrist.'

'And I can defend myself,' she answered. '*I* afraid of *you*? No; it was you who trembled and screamed like a woman when I touched you on the river bank that night we first met. It is *you* who have reason to be afraid of *me*.'

The colour went out of his face.

'No, I am not afraid of you,' continued Zita. 'I remember how, when you sought to ride on, I stopped your way, and drove you where I wanted you to go—drove you with the flail.'

He released her arm. She felt that his hand was shaking. He knew that it shook, and he was afraid lest she should observe it.

He walked in silence to the stable with his head lowered. Zita followed. She had gained a first advantage. She had forestalled his attack, and now, instead of her being cowed by him, he was subdued by her.

When they were both in the stable,—for she had followed him to show him how little fear

she entertained,—then he addressed her in an altered tone.

'You do not intend to leave me?'

'No; if you desire me to remain, I will remain.'

'I do desire it. I could not endure that you should go.'

'That is right; but why did you threaten me? I will stay. I could not put up old Jewel in the windmill, and I haven't been invited to Crumbland by Mark Runham.'

He stamped his foot impatiently and set his teeth.

'Why do you speak of him again?'

'Speech is free here—in the van—in a king's palace—everywhere save a gaol. I will speak of any one I choose, at any time, before any one, and in any place I like.'

'Why did you go with him to-day?'

'Because I am free to go where I choose, and with whom I choose. This is Sunday, and a holiday.'

'Yes; but if you have any regard for me, do not go with him at all.' He drew a long breath, removed and put on again his broad-brimmed hat. 'Why do you speak to me of payment for the trifling things I have done for you? of payment with warming-pans, red waistcoats, and fish-glue?'

'I am glad we are round to that point again,' said Zita, 'for speak of that I must. No one can

be expected to do things for nothing. If you house me and Jewel, and feed us both'—

'You have worked—you have done more than that beldame Leehanna and the girl would do in twenty years.'

'I have taken that into account. I know how many hours I have worked at fivepence three-farthings (needles and thread included). Nevertheless, the balance is against me. There is the warming-pan, or the scrubbing-brushes, or the fish-glue'—

He struck his fist against the stable door to drown her words.

Zita put her hand on his arm.

'It is of no good your acting the fool,' she said. 'What is right is right. I shouldn't feel square in my insides if the account were not balanced. My dear father was mighty particular on that score. Every night we balanced our accounts as true as any banker, with a stump of a pencil as he sucked. If I don't balance I can't sleep. I'll put to my account some pins I had set to yours, all because of that squinch of the wrist you gave me. If I were to leave your house to-morrow, Master Drownlands, you'd find on the shelf in my room a row of articles that I reckoned up would belong in rights to you as balancing our account.'

He did not answer. He thrust his horse into a stall and put a halter round its head.

Then Zita went to the corn-chest and brought

out a feed. The horse whinnied as he sniffed the oats. Drownlands was in the stall tightening the knot at the end of the halter. As Zita turned to depart, after having tossed the oats into the manger, he came out after her, and, laying hold of one side of the corn-measure, said—

'Are you going?'

'Yes. I have fed Pepper.'

He shook the measure, and said, in tones of angry discouragement, 'You will not take a bite of my bread, nor lie on a flock of my wool, nor cover your golden head with one tile of my roof, but you must weigh each and prize and pay me its value to the turn of a hair.'

'Not so exactly; of course, I leave a margin.'

'A margin of what?'

'Profits!'

'To whom?'

'To myself, of course. We should never get along in the world without profits. When we come to deal among friends, as you and I, then the profits are reasonable. But when one has to do with the general public,—that father always called the General Jackass,—then you lay it on thick and heavy. Without profits of some sort one can't sleep the sleep of innocence, as father said. But it is one thing dealing with General Jackass and another with a friend; and I want you to understand the footing on which we deal is the latter.'

'So—the footing of buy and sell?'

'Yes. I take my small profits. When a dressmaker makes your frocks, she charges you for a packet of needles and uses one—the rest are profits. She charges you for a knot of tape, and uses two yards and a half—the rest is profit. And she cuts out eight yards of lining, and puts down twelve—four are profits; and she puts you some frilling round your neck and cuffs, charging three yards, and she uses one—there's profits again. I do the same with you. I couldn't sleep if I didn't. It's feather bed and pillow and bolster to me—profits.'

'Take what you will. All you like.'

'No,' said Zita. 'Fair trade between us. We deal as friends. I respect and regard you too greatly to treat you as if you were General Jackass.'

Then she left the empty corn-measure in his hand and walked away, with a swing of the shoulders, a toss of the head, an elasticity in her tread, that appertained to one who was victor—not to one defeated. And Drownlands stood looking after her, holding the empty corn-measure, and he wondered at himself that he had been beaten at every point by this girl—he who had galloped home boiling with anger, resolved to break her into meek subjection to his will.

CHAPTER XV.

ON ANOTHER FOOTING.

A SOUGH of wind passed over the Fens like a long-drawn sigh. Every one who heard it listened in silence. It was repeated, and then the general comment was, 'The skating is over.'

Nor was the comment falsified by the event. The wind had veered round suddenly, without warning, to the south-west. It blew all night and sent a warm rain against the windows that faced that quarter. It covered wood and walls with dew. The ice broke up in the river, it dissolved in the dykes. The sails of the mills were again in revolution, they whirled merrily, merrily.

Zita had come upon the embankment to see the broken ice drift down the sluggish river, swept along by the wind rather than the current. There she encountered Mark Runham.

'What, you here, Cheap Jackie? No, hang it! I won't call you that. It seems impudent; but I do not mean that, you may be sure.'

'I know that, and am not offended.'

'Your name—it continually slips my memory.'

'Zita.'

'A queer sort of a name that.'

'It is not often you meet a Cheap Jack girl. They do not come thick as windmills in the flats. So it suits me to bear a queer name.'

'A queer name becomes a queer girl.'

'Thanks. I have something for you—half a pound of bird's eye.'

'What for?'

'In payment for my run on the ice.'

'I do not want payment.'

'It gave you trouble, made you hot, but it was a very great pleasure to me.'

'I won't take it.' The young fellow laughed with his merry eyes as well as with his fresh lips. 'Can you understand this, that it gave me five times as much pleasure as it did you to spin you along and see the red roses bloom in your cheeks and those dark eyes of yours twinkle as though there were Jack o' Lanterns dancing in them? Zita, it is not every day that a lad gets the chance of running a pretty girl along the ice. It is I am in debt to you. We'll square the account, anyhow.' He caught her head between his hands and gave her a kiss on her red lips. 'There is the account scored out, and a new account begun.'

'That is not fair!' exclaimed Zita, shrinking back.

'What! not settled? Again, then.' He kissed her once more. 'And so—till all is right, and the balance squared.'

Then he laughed, and, releasing her head, said—

'You know we raced,—that old Drownlands and I,—and you were to be the prize. I won you.' Then, seeing that she looked disturbed, he went off to, 'Now, Cheap Jackie, tell me, was not that a droll sort of a life, going over the world in that comical van?'

'It was a very happy life, and the van was not comical at all. It is splendid.'

'I have not seen it.'

'Then why did you call it unsuitable names?'

'A jolly life, was it?'

'Indeed it was. I was very happy in it—specially when we had piled up the profits.'

'You made a pile when you sold my father a flail for a guinea.'

'We did; but if it is any satisfaction to you to know it, it was the thoughts of that made him pass away so happy.'

'A guinea was nought to my father; he was rich. Now I am rich.' Then, with a trip of his foot on the bank as though he were dancing, 'Zita, what a joke it would be for us to go round in the summer with the old van and the stock-in-trade. What have you done with the goods?'

'They are safe.'

'And we will visit Swaffham, and Littleport,

and Ely together, and sell away like blazes. I'll attend to the horse, and you shall do all the talking the folk want. What fun it will be!'

'No,' said Zita, colouring; 'that will not be right.'

'Why not?'

'No. It was all very well with my father. But I will not go again.'

'You must—you shall—with me!'

'I will not—indeed I will not.' She turned away.

'Well, anyhow you will show me the van?'

'Yes. When you like.'

'I can't well go into Prickwillow as matters are between us and Drownlands—not that I bear him ill-will, but he is sour as a crab towards me. We will manage it somehow at some time. But I can't help thinking what fun it would be for us two to travel the world all over together, selling pots and pans. I wish I had been born a Cheap Jack. Where are you off to now, Zita?'

'I am going to see Kainie at Red Wings.'

'I will go with you. I also want to see her. I am very fond of Kainie, I am.' Said with a mischievous laugh.

'I daresay you are, but I am going alone.'

'Nonsense! I shall go with you. I must see Kainie. I have an errand to her.'

'Who sent you?'

Mark hesitated, then said, 'Well, no one. But it is business. I must go.'

'Then go. I will remain here.'

Zita observed a lighter moored to the bank in the river. She stepped towards it. 'I will go into the barge. Will you come with me and punt me about?'

'I cannot. I must go to Kainie.'

'You wanted to come with me in the van, asked me to go with you. Now I ask you to come with me in the boat, and you will not.'

'I pay you off,' said Mark good-naturedly. 'You would not travel with me in the van, so I will not travel with you in the barge. But, seriously, I cannot. I must go on to Kainie. Come along with me,' urged Mark. 'Kainie will be pleased to see you.'

'Oh! you can answer for her?'

'In some things; certainly in this.'

'I will not go.'

Zita pouted and turned her back on Mark. The young man did not press her to change her intention. The decision in her face, the look in her eyes, convinced him that his labour would be in vain were he to attempt it. He started in the direction of Red Wings without her, and whistled as he walked. Zita's brow was moody. She was a girl of impulse and of no self-restraint, changeful in temper and vehement in passion.

There was no reason why she should resent Mark's going to Red Wings, and yet she did resent it. If he had to go, and she refused to accompany him, he must go without her. That

was obvious, and yet she was very wroth. In her mind she contrasted Drownlands with Mark. She had but to express a wish to the former, and it was complied with. Had she said to him that she desired him to row her on the canal, he would have placed himself at her service with eager delight. But this scatterbrained Mark had no notion of submission to her wishes. He had desired her society on the bank; when she refused it, he did without it, and did without it with a light heart—he went away whistling.

Zita stepped into the barge and seated herself on the side. She put her chin in her hand and looked sullenly into the water full of broken, half-dissolved pieces of ice.

She was hot, her angry blood was racing through her veins. She was, in her way, as impetuous as Drownlands. She had been suffered in her girlhood by her father to follow her own bent, to do just what she liked. But, indeed, there had been no occasion for him to cross her, their interests were identical. Good-natured though Zita was, she was masterful. She had sense, but sense is sometimes obscured by passion.

She sat biting her nails. A fire was in her cheeks, and now and then the tears forced themselves into her burning eyes.

What could Mark have to call him to Red Wings?

What possible business could he have with Kainie?

Red Wings was not on his land; the mill did not drain his dykes.

Zita marvelled how long Mark would remain with Kerenhappuch. Would he sit down with her in her cabin? Would their conversation turn on herself—Zita? Would Mark say that she was sulky? What would Kerenhappuch reply? Would she not say, 'What else can you expect from a girl who is a vagabond? We who lead settled lives in mills and farmhouses know how to behave ourselves. What can you get out of a chimney but soot? What does a marsh breed but gadflies?'

It is really wonderful what a cloud of torments an ingenious mind can rouse if it resolves to give run to fancy. Perhaps a woman is more prone to this than a man. She conceives conversations relative to herself; she puts into the mouths of the speakers the most offensive expressions relative to herself. She wreathes their faces with contemptuous smiles, gives to their voices insulting intonations, and finally assumes that all the brood of her festering brain is real fact, and not mirage.

It was so now with Zita.

She was startled from her reverie of self-torment by a shock in the boat. She looked up, startled, and saw before her a man with long arms and large hands, dark-haired and dark-

eyed. He was handsome, but his face bore an expression of sour discontent. The thin lips were indicative of a sharp and querulous temper, and the cheeks seemed as though they could not dimple into laughter.

'What are you doing in the lighter?' asked the man, whom Zita recognised as Ephraim Beamish, the orator.

'I suppose I have as much right to be in the boat as you,' answered the girl peevishly.

'No doubt. We neither have any right anywhere. We are both poor. I know who you are—the Cheap Jack girl. I hear you have been taken into Prickwillow. Wish you happiness. It is not the place I should care to be in. Drownlands is not the man to clothe the poor, house the wanderer, feed the hungry, without expecting his reward—and that here. He does nothing of good to any one but to serve his own ends. He has just had me turned out.'

'Turned out of what?'

'Turned out of my mill, out of my employ, out of my livelihood. I have now to run about the fens, in ice and snow. I have no home. I am a gentleman, however, for I have no work. The rats may shelter in the barn, the mice may nest in the stack, but I must be without a roof to cover my head, without work to engage my hands, and without bread to put into my mouth. And all for why? Because I have been bold to speak the truth. Truth is like light. Men

hate it and turn their eyes from it. Them as speaks the truth gets persecuted, and I am one of these.'

'You can obtain work elsewhere,' said Zita, displeased at having her imaginary troubles broken in on by some one with a real grievance.

'No, I cannot,' answered Beamish; 'the owners of property hang together like bees when they swarm. If you disturb one, the whole hive sets on you and stings you to death.'

'Well,' said Zita irritably, 'you need not tell me all this. I cannot assist you.'

'I do not suppose you can. But—has Property got into your blood, that you speak so sharp to me? Maybe, like a bat, you're hanging on to it by a claw. Like a gnat, you have your lips to it, and are sucking your fill. I do not ask your help. I fend for myself. But I like to talk. Nothing will be done to correct evils if the evils be not talked about. You must go round Jericho and blow the trumpets seven times, and seven times again, before the walls will fall, and we can march up and take the city. Let Property look out. The working people will not stand to be robbed and maltreated any longer.'

Beamish unloosed the rope that attached the boat to the shore, and, taking a pole, thrust out and began slowly to force the vessel up stream, talking as he punted.

'You may tell Drownlands my curse rests on

him; and that will rot his timber and rust his corn.'

'I will bear him no such message,' said Zita. 'But where are you taking me?'

'Up the river. I shall leave you presently; but I will return and punt you back again.'

'Where are you going?'

'To Red Wings.'

'What do you want there?'

'I have an errand,' answered Beamish.

'There is one gone there before you, with an errand from himself—and that is Mark Runham.'

'He there!' exclaimed Pip Beamish, leaning on the punting-pole and looking down into the water. 'Property meets one everywhere. Property blights everything. I am a poor chap. I am cast out of employ; but I did think I had my ewe lamb. And now Property comes between me and her. Property says to me, "Go—what I cannot consume I will destroy, lest you have it." Do you think, you Cheap Jack girl, that Mark Runham will marry Kainie? He is a man of property, and property hungers for property. She is like me. She has nothing. She is a miller grinding nought save water.'

He thrust the boat towards the shore.

'I'll not go to see her,' said Beamish. 'I could not bear it. I'm off to the Duck at Isleham. I shall meet there some fellows who love the working people, and who will combine to teach

these men who hold the Fens in their fists to deal with their labourers justly and mercifully.'

He leaped ashore, mounted the bank, and, standing there, extended his long arms and expanded his great hands, and cried, 'I see the day coming! I see the light about to break! The trumpet will sound, and the dead and crushed working men will rise and stand on their feet. That will be a day of vengeance!—a day of fire and consuming heat! Then will the fen-farmers call to the earth to swallow them, and to the isles to cover them, against the anger of the dead men risen up in judgment against them.'

'There comes Mark,' said Zita. 'I suppose I must get him to punt me home. But I shall not speak to him all the way.'

CHAPTER XVI.

BURNT HATS.

AT the time of our tale, the Duck at Isleham—a solitary inn on slightly rising ground—was notorious as a place of resort for poachers, a centre to which smuggled goods were brought from the Wash, and whence they were distributed, and a general rendezvous for the dissatisfied. Not a bad trade was done at the Duck. Thither came the poachers as to a mart for the disposal of their game, and the dealers to take the spoil of the poachers; thither came not only those who brought, up the dark path from the sea, spirits which had not paid duty, but also the farmers who desired to lay in supplies. As the fen-water was not potable unmixed, it was a matter of necessity for the fen-dwellers to temper it with something that would neutralise its unpleasant savour as well as kill its unwholesome elements. Moreover, such being the case, those who desired to lay in a stock of this counteracting agent went for it, by a law of nature, to the cheapest shop, and

the cheapest shop was that where the traffic was in spirits that were contraband. Lastly, at the Duck assembled the great company of grumblers, large everywhere, but especially large in the Fens.

As the Duck afforded space for a good many grumblers in bar and kitchen and parlour, and as grumblers like to grumble into the ears of men of their own kidney, the Duck drew to it the discontented of all classes—farmers dissatisfied with their rent, yeomen dissatisfied at their rates, artisans out of humour because trade was slack, gangers, clayers, bankers, gaulters, slodgers, millers, molers, gozzards—every one whom the depressing atmosphere of the Fens made dispirited, and who thought the cause of his depression was due to the oppression of some one else.

The kitchen of the Duck was full. A great fire of turf was heaped up, and glowed red, diffusing heat, but giving out no flame, and, notwithstanding the tobacco smoke, filling the place with its penetrating, peculiar odour. The men present—on this occasion they were all men—were drinking; they were mostly men of the class of agricultural labourer. Among them were two or three with dazed eyes, men silent, pallid, who looked at the speakers and acquiesced in every sentiment or opinion expressed, however contradictory they might be. These were opium-eaters.

In the Fens, almost every cottage grows its crop of white poppy in the small garden. Of the poppy heads a tea is brewed. The mothers

are accustomed to work in the fields, hoeing between the ranks of wheat. The rich soil that produces the corn produces also weeds that have to be kept under. That the babe may not interfere with the mother earning a small wage, it is given poppy tea, and that sends it to sleep for the day. But the drops of opium thus administered in infancy affect the tender brains, bewilder them, and subject the child to nervous pains. As it grows up to man or womanhood, it has recourse to the drug to which it was brought up in infancy. A large business in laudanum is done in the Fens, and much of the distraught mind and tortured nerve is due to this cause. The poppy tea dispels trouble as surely as whisky, and opium dulls pain at a cheaper and surer rate than the surgeon who boggles over its removal.

'I tell you,' said Pip Beamish, 'it is due to the farmers and yeomen. Look at them, up to the eyes in gold, and gold that is squeezed out of the fen by your hands. Till they have been taught a lesson, and that a sharp and stinging one, they will go on in the same way. No Acts of Parliament will help us. You may send up whom you will, Whig or Tory, to Westminster, it is the same. No party will do aught for you. No judges and no jury are of any avail, for law can't come in and right us. We must do that with our own hands. When a boy won't do the right thing, you put a stick across his back and make him; you don't ask for an Act of Parlia-

ment, you don't elect a member to teach him his duty. We must teach our farmers as you teach idle and thievish boys. Teach them in such a way as they won't forget. Teach them to fear the rod. Set the stackyards blazing throughout the Fens, and by the light of those fires they'll begin to see what is the way of justice and equity.'

'I don't see how that's going to lower the price of wheat,' said a ganger, named Silas Gotobed. 'You sez that the cost of bread is too high. If you burn the wheatstacks, there will be less corn, and up the price will go.'

'You're right there. That's reason, Silas,' said a third, Thomas Goat, a gaulter. 'The mischief don't lie with the farmers. They grow the corn—some one must do that. The wickedness is in the eaters.'

'Why, we're all eaters.'

'Ay!' said Goat sententiously. 'But we've a right to eat; there be a lot eats as hasn't a right to do so.'

'You mean rats and mice.'

'No, I don't—leastways not four-legged ones.'

'What do you mean, then?'

'It is them collegers,' said Goat. 'I've been to Cambridge. I've seen them there, a thousand of them. They come up in swarms from every part of England, and there they do nought but eat and drink and row on the river, and play cricket on Parker's Piece. Rowin' and playin' cricket ain't qualifications for eatin'. What

would you say if a thousand rats, big as bullocks, was to come on to the Fens and attack our stacks? There'd be a pretty outcry. Every man would take down his gun. The terriers would be called for. Traps, poison would be laid, and none quiet till every rat was exterminated. Very well, up from every part of England come these darned collegers to the Univarsity, and spend their time there, eatin'—eatin'—eatin'. Mates, I axes, what are they eatin'? It is the wheat we grow on our fens. I calculate that one-half of what we grow goes down into their stomicks. If there were no collegers, then there 'd be twice as much corn, and corn would be at forty-eight instead of ninety-six. It is that Univarsity and them collegers does it. I have shown you that as clear as these five fingers of mine. If that ain't reason, show me where it is to be found.'

'I don't hold with you,' said Gotobed, impatient at having his say snapped out of his mouth. 'I suppose collegers must eat somewhere.'

'Let them stay and eat at home.'

'Well, but what about the price of wheat at their homes? Won't they diminish the supply there?'

'That don't concern us,' shouted a clayer named Gathercole. 'It is no odds to us what the supply and what the price is elsewhere. All that concerns us is the supply and the price here in the Fens. Goat, you've hit the wrong nail on the head! I know better than you; it's the bankers does it.'

'What have you to say against the bankers?' asked Goat. 'I'd like to know where the corn would be if the bankers did not keep the rivers from overflow.'

'I mean those who have banks in towns,' explained Gathercole. 'I've been to Mortlock's in Ely. I've seen what the clerks do there. They have drawers full of gold. They don't trouble to put their fingers to it, they shovel it in and shovel it out like muck. Whence does Mortlock get all that gold, I ask. It comes out of the Fens. The farmers are such dizzy-fools that they put their money there for Mortlock to take care of, and Mortlock sends the money out of the country to America. What's the advantage of the farmers growing corn, and of the labourers helping to grow it, what's the pleasure to reap and sow and plough and mow and be a farmer's boy, if all the money earned and addled goes into Mortlock's bank, and Mortlock sends it to America? I wish I was in Parliament one week, and I'd hang every banker in the country, and burn every ship as takes the money out of England and carries it to America.'

'I say it is the millers,' said Isaac Harley, a clayer. 'You send a sack of corn to the soak-mill, and you get back half a sack of flour. How is that? There should be as much flour come back as corn went, but there does not. I have proved it scores of times. I've sent a sack so full of wheat that I could scarce bind the

mouth, and when it came back as flour it was but half full. That is what makes corn so dear—the millers steal it. If I were king for half a day, I'd drown every miller in England in his own dam.'

'You are all of you out,' said a small landowner, named Abraham Cutman. 'But it is like your ignorance. You feel that the shoe pinches, but you don't know where it pinches, and why it pinches. I will tell you. I have education, and you have not. It is the rates. We are paying from six to seven shillings an acre for the drainage of the Fens. The rate has been up to ten shillings and sixpence. Why should we pay that? We can't afford to pay seven shillings an acre in rates, and pay our workmen well also. All the profits are consumed in rates. The Commissioners stick it on, and they can't help it; they must have the banks kept up and the mills in working order.'

'Of course they must,' threw in the gaulter.

'They must have their mills,' said Beamish. 'But why am I thrown out of employ, that did no wrong, and never neglected my duty?'

'Silence all round. Listen to me,' said Cutman. 'The wrong lies here. Take off the rate, and the price of corn will go down, and the price of labour will go up.'

'That's it. Cutman has it!' exclaimed several.

But Goat dissented. 'There must be a rate,' said he, 'or how should I be paid for my gaulting? and without gaulting there can be no banking.'

'Of course there must be a rate. I'd have it permanently fixed by Act of Parliament at fifteen shillings an acre.'

'You would?'

'Yes, I would; so that gaulters and bankers should have double wages. They work hard and deserve it.'

'Right you are, master,' said Goat; but others murmured.

'Why should gaulters and bankers only have double pay? Why not molers and gozzards also?' others again asked. 'How about the price of wheat then?'

'I said I'd have the rate fixed at fifteen shillings an acre,' pursued Cutman, looking about him with an air of superiority. 'Fifteen shillings an acre—not a penny less. But I'd have the rate shifted from fen-land as wants draining to all other land in Great Britain as doesn't want draining. The rate should be laid on all other shoulders except ours. Stick a rate on to Mortlock's and all bankers. Stick it on to the colleges and the universities. Stick it on to all high and dry lands, where there is no call for banking and draining. Stick it on where you like, only take it off from the Fens. Why should we pay rates for draining our land when the farmers on high ground pay nothing? They have their land six or seven shillings an acre cheaper than do we. If I were in the Ministry, the first thing I would do would be

to impose a compulsory rate of fifteen shillings an acre on all land that didn't want draining, to pay for the draining of land that did want it. Then we'd have high times of it here in the Fens—farmers, bankers, slodgers, all round. If that is not reason, and you don't see it, so much the worse for your intelligences.'

'I don't call that reason at all,' said Goat. 'Don't tell me the Commissioners would pay us double wages when the rate was at fifteen. It is six now, and I get eleven shillings a week. Twelve years ago it was half a guinea rate, and then my wage was ten shillings. If the rate were up to fifteen I should be wuss off. Every four shillings the rate goes up my wage goes down a shilling. With the rate at fifteen, I'd be worse off—with a wage of five and sixpence, or six shillings at most. I hold to it that the mischief lies in the Univarsity, with them collegers a-eatin'—eatin'—eatin'. I'll fight at flap-chap any man as disputes my argiment.'

'I dispute it,' said Silas Gotobed, starting up.

'Very well. We'll find out which has the best of the argiment and reason on his side with flap-chaps.'

'My argiment is this,' said Gotobed. 'Rivers ought to run uphill. If they don't choose to, they should be made to, by Act of Parliament. Then we'd be dry, and them on high grounds would be wet. Then they'd have the rates and the bother, and we'd be free. That is my

contention, and it's all gammon about them collegers.'

He placed himself opposite Goat.

'I don't care what you may call yourself,' said he to his opponent, 'Goat or sheep; but you're an ass, and every one knows it.'

Then Ephraim Beamish ran between the men, who stood facing each other with threatening looks.

'Be reasonable,' he said, thrusting them apart with his long arms. 'Why do you fly at each other, instead of at the common foe?'

'I don't know what be the common foe,' retorted Goat, 'if it bain't the collegers. If I was in Parliament'—

'It's the bankers,' said Jonas Gathercole. 'If I was in Parliament'—

'It's the millers!' shouted Harley. 'If I was in Parliament'—

'It's the rates!' exclaimed Cutman; 'and a law should be made, and shall be when I'm in Parliament'—

'You're every one out!' roared Silas Gotobed; 'it's Providence, as don't do what it should be made to do, and force the rivers to run uphill.'

'Sit down! you're drunk,' cried Cutman.

'I'm not going to be ordered about by you,' retorted the ganger; 'we're all equal here. I haven't been bankrupt and sold my stacks twice over.'

Cutman fell into the rear. He had been guilty of fraudulent conduct at his bankruptcy.

'I say it is the Univarsity, and I maintains my argiment,' said Goat. 'I'll prove it on your chaps.'

'I sez it is the rivers ought to run uphill. I'll box your donkey ears if you denies it. That's my argiment.'

Gotobed made a lunge at this opponent and missed him. Flap-chaps is a pastime affected in the Fens, more so in former times than at present, but not out of favour now. It consists in this. Two men face each other and endeavour to slap each other's cheeks, right or left, as best they can, and as best they can to ward off with the same open palm the blows aimed at their own chaps. Those who play this game acquire great dexterity at it, but when much ale or spirits has been drunk, then the eye has lost its quickness of perception, the hand its steadiness, the brain its coolness, and the contest rapidly degenerates into a drunken brawl and a roll on the floor, with fisticuffs and head-bumping.

It promised to so degenerate on the present occasion. Gotobed was the most intoxicated and least able to parry the blows levelled at him, and every time Goat's hand made his cheek sting, it roused him to a further access of fury that blinded him to what he was about; he withdrew his left hand from behind his back. This provoked an outcry from the lookers-on of, 'Not fair play! Hand back! hand back!'

Beamish again endeavoured to interpose, but came off with both his ears tingling; he had

received a blow on one cheek from Goat, and on the other from Gotobed. The strife recommenced after this futile attempt to separate the men. Slap, slap, on the chaps of Gotobed, followed by a blow from his fist in the face of his adversary. This occasioned a yell from all in the room of 'Cheat—not fair! a fine! a fine, Silas! Fair game or none at all.'

'I'll pay a fine indeed!' roared Gotobed. Then, springing at his opponent, who staggered stupefied under the blow he had received, he snatched his hat from his head, and, thrusting it into the fire, shouted, 'Caps! Caps!' Then he dashed at Cutman, who wore a white beaver.

'Your hat!' he demanded.

'You shall not have it. It is as good as new.'

'I will have it,' answered Gotobed. 'Ain't we all equal? Isn't it the rule? What are you better than me? One cap—all caps. That's the rule.'

He tore the white beaver out of the yeoman's hands, and rammed it with his ironshod boot into the glowing turf fire.

'Mates! Mates! Show up your caps!'

Then ensued wild confusion. Some snatched the caps and hats from those who were near them, some endeavoured to protect their own headgear from confiscation, and fought for them. Some thrust their own caps into the flames, and in ten minutes there was not one in

the company but was without a cover for his crown.[1]

Beamish had made angry resistance. Three men assailed him, tripped him up, and sent him sprawling on the alehouse floor. A fourth wrenched his hat away and thrust it into the flames, shouting, 'You're a fine chap to say all men are equal, and want to keep your own hat when the rest are bareheaded.'

The landlord stepped outside, to see that the fiery tinder did not fall on and ignite the thatch. He returned and said, 'It is snowing.'

'Snowing, is it?' said Gotobed, staggering to the door. 'Then we shall all wear white night-caps to cool our heads.' Standing in the doorway, sustaining himself by a hand on each of the jambs, looking in, he shouted to his comrades, 'I am right. You are all wrong. At next election I ain't going to vote for no candidate as won't promise to make the rivers run uphill. Nothing will be as it ought to be—price of corn won't be low, and wages won't be high, and farmers cease to oppress, and bankers to send the money out of this country, and millers to fill their fists with flour, and Commissioners to pocket money that ought to have gone to the gangers, and collegians to cease to eat—till Providence has been forced to do what it ort—and make the rivers run uphill.'

[1] Burnt caps is a curious and inexplicable custom in the Fens. It is one that terminates many a brawl. If one man burns the hat of another, it is *de rigueur* that all the rest of the company should surrender their headgear to complete the holocaust.

CHAPTER XVII.

A CRAWL ABROAD.

NO country in the world is so subject to variations in the climate as England, and in no part of England are the variations so felt as in the Fens. No hills, no belts of trees there break the force of the wind. The gales rush over the plains unresisted from every quarter. Elsewhere there are hedgerows, on the sunny side of which appear the celandine and primrose in early spring, then the red-robin, the bluebell, our lady's smock, and the gorgeous spires of foxglove later still. There are no hedgeflowers in the Fens, for there are no hedges. Elsewhere the landscape is variegated with coppice that is brown in autumn and pine woods that are dark green all the year. It is not so in the Fens. There are no trees. When the snow falls, it envelops the entire surface in white.

The frost had passed away, and the waters had been released. With the thaw the mills

had been set again in motion, and the sails flew fast to make up for lost time. Now again a single night had altered the complexion of the fen-land. All was white that had been black. The snow had filled the ruts, and, consolidating, had formed a comparatively smooth surface. Rivers and dykes were not frozen, only a little cat ice had formed among the reeds.

Zita was in the farmyard. She had gone there to put her van to rights. The van demanded her attention. The fowls had taken to roosting on the top, and had made it untidy. There was no keeping them away. They could be, and they were, excluded from the interior of the van, but not from the shed in which the van stood. Formerly, they had been satisfied with rafters and manger; now, whether out of perversity or love of variety, or because the van satisfied their ideal, they deserted their ancient roosting-places and crowded the van roof.

This was a source of incessant annoyance to Zita, who could not endure the degradation to which the van was subjected. Every few days she visited the shed, pail and scrubbing-brush in hand, and thoroughly cleansed the conveyance.

She had been thus engaged, and had flung the dirty water at a clucking hen that sauntered up with purpose to resume its perch on the van top, when a pair of hands was laid on her shoulders, and, looking round, she saw Mark.

'What has brought you here?' she asked in surprise.

'What but your own sweet self. I have not seen you for some days. As you were not outside the farmyard, I have come into it to seek you.'

'You ought not to have done so. The master will be angry.'

'He is from home. I saw him ride to Ely.'

'But if he hears that you have been here?'

'You need not tell him.'

'I will not tell him, but others may—mischief-makers. Then I shall suffer.'

'You can take care of yourself, I warrant.'

'You are right, I can protect myself. I am not a servant, but a lodger. I pay for everything I receive and consume here—even for this soap and the use of this pail.'

'And this is the van?'

'Yes, that is my old home. I was born in it. I have lived in it all my life. Whatever I know I have learned in it. It is a fine thing to crawl over the world like a snail, with one's house on one's back.'

'The snail-crawling is over with you now. You refused to let me go with you.'

'Yes; it is over for the winter. What I may do when the spring comes, I cannot say. My blood runs, my feet tingle. When the white butterflies are about, I daresay I shall spread my wings also. I mean my red and gold curtains.'

'And I may go with you?' mischievously.

'No; if I go, I go alone.'

'Let me walk round and admire your house on wheels.'

'You do not see it to advantage,' said Zita regretfully. 'It is not dressed out. The pans and brushes and mats are stowed away, that make it glitter just like a lifeguardsman. The inside is taken out. The curtains are unhung. And then those dratted fowls are a nuisance. They have taken a fancy to the van. If Master Drownlands and I were on better terms, I'd ax him to have the fowls killed, or the shed boarded up, that they might not come in.'

'What? you are not on good terms with old Ki?'

'Only middling. I have had to teach him to keep his distance.'

'Oh! he wanted to come to too close quarters—small blame to him,' said Mark, laughing.

'He and I could not agree about terms—that was it,' said Zita, with an impatient and annoyed toss of her head.

'Let the van come to my place,' said Runham. 'Then I will stow it away out of reach of all fowls.'

Zita shook her head. 'I like to look at my van every day.'

'Well, that is no reason against sending it to Crumbland. If you come to look at it twice a day, so much the better pleased I shall be.'

'I cannot send the van anywhere where I am not living, and this is my lodging for the winter,' said Zita.

'And how goes the horse?' asked Mark.

'He don't go at all,' replied the girl. 'He eats and thinks and gets bloated. He hasn't enough to do. I'm afraid he'll be out of health.'

'Let us have him into the shafts and trot him out a bit.'

'What? in the van?'

'Of course, in the van.'

Zita flushed with pleasure. 'I shall love it above all things—but trot he won't. He never trotted in his life but once, and that was on the fifth of November. A gipsy had tied a Roman candle to his tail. He trotted then. After every flare and pop he went on at a run, then he stopped and looked behind him for an explanation. Then away went the Roman candle again, and a great globe of fire shot away high over the roof of the van. At that Jewel trembled and trotted on once more. Father was away. I was younger then by some years, and it frightened me. I did not dare to touch the Roman candle. Jewel ran about two miles, and when the firework was exhausted, he stood still, and, with thinking about it, and trying to understand and unable, fell asleep in the middle of the road. Father found us there, and he tried to persuade Jewel to return the two miles, but he was obstinate—tremenjous—and wouldn't

move. At last father was forced to tie a Roman candle to his nose, and that drove him backwards the two miles. But I don't think Jewel ever quite got over the surprise of that fifth of November.'

When Mark had done laughing at Zita's story, —and Zita laughed as she told it, and laughed when it was over, because Mark's laugh was irresistible,—then the young fellow said, 'It will be fun for me, pleasure to you, it will exercise the horse, and freshen and sweeten the van. We will go a drive, in preparation for the grand tour in the spring. Where is the harness? I'll rig the grey up.'

'You do not know how to set about it,' said Zita.

'What? not know how to harness a horse?'

'You do not know Jewel. He has to be talked to, and his reason convinced. He has his fancies, and they must be humoured. He knows my voice and the touch of my hand, whereas you are a stranger.'

Zita went to find Jewel and put the horse in the shafts. Whilst thus engaged, she talked to Mark.

'The master had him out one day, and put him in the plough. It offended Jewel, who was not accustomed to that sort of thing. He set his feet straight down, stiffened his legs, back went his ears, he curled his under lip, and looked out at the corners of his eyes. Not a step would he

take; it hurt his self-respect. Now, wait here by Jewel's head whilst I go indoors after the crimson curtains and gold tassels. I could not drive without them; it would not be showing proper regard for the van, and it might hurt Jewel's feelings. It won't take five minutes to rig up the curtains, and whilst I am after them, you can make friends with the horse. Go in front of him and speak flattering words; say how shapely are his legs, and how silken is his hair; but, whatever you do, not a word about the Roman candles, or he'll never take kindly to you.'

'All right, Zita. Where is the whip?'

'Whip? bless you! he don't want a whip. Why, the crack of a whip would so frighten him that he would sit down. He'd suppose it was fifth of November again. He'd curl his tail under him, and lay his nose between his legs, and set back his ears, but keep an eye open, watching you and winking.'

Eventually, the van was considered by Zita to be sufficiently decorated to be got under way, and Jewel was induced, by flattery and caresses, to start along the drove.

The van was lighter than Jewel had ever known it to be, and he might have been expected to take this into consideration, and accelerate his pace; but, under the supposition that by so doing he would be establishing a precedent that might be quoted on a future

occasion, he adopted his wonted pace, as when drawing the van laden with its many and multifarious contents.

'The thing jolts—rather,' said Mark, laughing. 'What would become of the goods, were they here?'

'They would be thrown all over the shop,' answered Zita. 'That is why I am at Prickwillow. I cannot get away. Jewel could not pull the laden van along the drove; and if other horses were attached to it, everything would be shaken to pieces.'

Presently Jewel came to a halt.

'Shall I jump out and urge him on?' asked Mark.

'No; he is breathing. He will go on again presently.'

'And whilst he is breathing, we will talk. Conversation is impossible when we are bumping into ruts and bouncing over clods. If this be travelling when there is snow half-choking the wheelruts and levelling the clods, what must it be at other times?'

'You see I am a prisoner at Prickwillow. I cannot get away without the loss of all my possessions.'

'I see that now.'

Presently Mark said, 'Zita, why were you on the river with Pip Beamish the other day?'

'I hired him with half a pound of bird's eye to punt me up stream. He behaved unfair; he went off and left me.'

'And I had to bring you back—and mighty cross you were. Was that because Beamish had left you?'

'I had cause to be cross when Beamish took the bird's eye and did not half do the job. Now cling hard; Jewel is moving forward, and we must hold to our seats to save being tumbled about and broken to bits.'

Mark was on one side of the van, Zita on the other. He put out his hand to the curtains at one lurch, and roused Zita to remonstrance.

'The curtains are for ornament, and are not to be touched. They are of velvet plush. I don't want to have your great hand marking them. Lay hold of a rail. No! not a gold tassel; you would pull that down, and maybe bring away the whole concern. Oh!'

This exclamation was provoked by the off wheel sinking into a rut, the depth of which seemed unfathomable. The movement of the van was like that of the mail steamer that runs from Dover to Calais, in a chopping sea. At one bound Zita was propelled forward, and, had she not clung to the ribs of the vehicle, would have been shot head foremost against the opposite side of the van, with the result of either perforating that side or of flattening her skull against it.

Then, at the recoil lurch, Mark was projected in the opposite direction, and was nearly cast into Zita's lap.

'I say, Zita, the exertion is prodigious!' exclaimed the lad. 'I think I should prefer to walk.'

'But the honour is so great,' gasped Zita. 'It is not every day you can ride in such a conveyance as this, and have velvet curtains flapping, and gold tassels bobbing about your head.'

'I'll try to think of it in that light.'

'Besides,' pursued Zita, 'a shake up is as good as medicine to the insides. It puts them on their good behaviour. They are so tremenjous afraid of having it again.'

'But surely progress in this affair is not always like this.'

'Of course not. It is only in the Fens there are droves. It was bad at times where a highway had been new stoned. Then father and I clung to the perishables.'

'How do you mean?'

'We took them in our arms, or held them. If we were bruised, it did not matter; we mend up according to nature; but pots and pans don't. We always lost something, though. There was that tea-kettle that troubled father's last hours—it got a hole in it going over a bit of new road.'

This conversation took place in fits and starts, between the joltings of the van. Presently Jewel thought he had sufficiently exerted himself; he heaved a long sigh, looked back over his shoulder, and stood still.

'There, now,' said Runham, pulling a large red, white-spotted kerchief from his pocket and mopping his brow, 'Jewel is breathing, and so may we. This is agonies.'

'I call it pleasure,' said Zita. 'It must be, because it isn't business.'

'What did the horse mean by looking back at us, as he did just now when he sighed?'

'Oh, he thinks it is his duty, now father's gone, to keep an eye on us.'

'I suppose, if I were to square accounts, as the other day'—

'He'd have an apoplexy. For goodness' sake don't.'

'I say, why did you go with Pip Beamish when you would not go with me?'

'I did not go with Beamish. He came with me because I hired him. Tell me what took you to Red Wings? Had you an account to serve there?'

Mark became grave. He fidgeted on his seat. He was an honest, open-hearted fellow, and disliked prevarication, but there was hesitation, there was evasion in his reply.

'I have business of all sorts with all kinds of people.'

'That is no answer. I want to know why you went to the mill to see Kainie.'

Mark rested his chin in his hand and considered.

'I don't mind saying so much,' he answered,

'but let it be between us alone. There is a sort of a tie between her and me—a sort of a tie, you know.'

'I know nothing.'

'I can't give you particulars. It's all right,—if you knew, you would say so too,—but I can't tell you more about it; and it's a tie can't be got rid of.'

Further explanation was interrupted, for a head and pair of shoulders appeared in front between the curtains.

'Oh! you, Runham—and that Cheap Jack girl! Which is it to be—she or Kainie? It shall not be both.'

Pip Beamish was there, glowering at Mark from under his bushy eyebrows.

'Take care!' said Beamish, thrusting a long arm into the van. 'Take care what you are about. If you hurt one hair of the head of Kainie, I'll shoot you through the heart. I've time on my hands now. I'm turned out of my mill by the Commissioners, and can choose my occasion. I shall watch you. One or other—leave my Kainie alone and stick to *her*.' He indicated Zita with one hand.

'Pip,' said Mark, flushing very red, 'do not talk nonsense!'

'Nonsense?' repeated Beamish; 'that is how you rich men treat these matters—sport and nonsense; but to us it is heartbreak and despair. What have I but my one ewe lamb? I have

been expelled my mill because you Commissioners think I'm a dangerous chap. You ain't far wrong there. I'm dangerous to such as you who are evil-doers. Take care, you Cheap Jack girl, and make not yourself cheap to such as Runham. He is free in his wealth to do as he pleases. If he be the ruin of you, trusting in him, will he lose his Commissioner's place? If he destroy my happiness by bringing harm on my Kainie, will the laws touch him? I may not take a straw from his stables, but he may rob me of my Kainie. He is rich—I am poor.'

'Pip! you are the man I desire to see. I will speak to you of this matter. Judge nothing before you hear me; and you, Zita, do not you place any weight on his words—they are bitter and false.'

'Bitter,' repeated Pip, 'but not false. Nothing that you can say will change my mind. Nothing will alter my purpose. I warn you against an injury to Kainie. You rich men of the Fens do not seek a poor girl to raise her head and set her up on high among yourselves, but to humble her in the dust.'

He laughed a fierce, scornful laugh.

'I cannot say—you Cheap Jack Zita. They report that you have money and goods. Have you told him how much? If it be worth his while, he will be honourable towards you. It is all a matter of calculation. If you ain't worth much, he'll throw you over, as he would throw

over Kainie when tired of her. Best take care! If you dare!'

The man's eyes glared with white heat, and he thrust his long arm towards Mark with clenched fist.

'Pip,' exclaimed Mark, 'you are the man I have been wanting to see. I will come out to you.'

He jumped out of the van. 'Your words are folly.' Then, 'You drive home without me, Zita. I told you I had business with all sorts of persons; now I have business with Ephraim—business of much consequence. May you get safe back in that rattletrap, and not be shaken to bits!'

'Rattletrap? Oh, if Jewel heard you!' She spoke as laughing, to disguise her inward trouble.

No sooner, however, was Mark gone than she broke down and cried.

But her tears did not last long.

'He's venomous. He don't know all. I do trust Mark. Besides—I've the van and money.'

CHAPTER XVIII.

A DROP OF GALL.

WHAT did Mark Runham mean by his conduct?

He had left Zita to go after that fellow, Pip Beamish, and they were together on the embankment in close confabulation. The girl looked after them from between the red curtains, and could see Beamish gesticulating with his long arms. He was excited, he was speaking with vehemence, and at intervals Mark interrupted him.

Something that Mark had said seemed to have struck the orator with surprise. He dropped his arms and stood like a figure of wood. He let Mark lay his hand on his shoulder and draw him along, speaking rapidly into his ear.

What this meant was plain to Zita. The two men were rivals for Kainie of Red Wings. They had been disputing; Beamish hot and impatient, and unwilling to listen to the other. What was Kainie? A she-miller, as Zita put

it, and ineligible as a wife to such as Runham. Among fen-farmers no one marries for mere love; money or land is the substance for which they crave. If a little love be sprinkled on the morsel, so much the better, but it is no essential —it is a condiment. Zita tossed her head. She was not a beggarly miller! She had the van and its contents, red curtains and gold tassels. She had money as well—the profits of fair-days at Swaffham, Huntingdon, Wisbeach, Cambridge, and Ely. She had a good deal of money in her box—none suspected how much. Of course her wealth would not compare with that of a fen-farmer, but it was enough to place her immeasurably above Kainie, and within reach of Mark if he chose to stoop a little—just a little.

Zita turned the head of Jewel homewards. Mark did not follow her to say farewell. He had given her no thanks for the jolting and jumbling in the conveyance to which she had treated him, though 'good as medicine to his insides.'

Zita was angry with the young man. She did not relish the thought that he came to see her one day and went to Kainie the next—nay, that he visited both in the same afternoon.

It was true that he had made no overtures to Zita—said nothing definite relative to his condition of heart; but he had kissed her, and would have done so again had she not warned him that it would give the horse an apoplectic

fit. He had shown her plainly that he liked her company, and that he was unhappy if he did not see her daily.

His attentions had been noticed. Mrs. Tunkiss had commented on them, and the girl with St. Vitus' dance had made a joke about them.

His visit that day to Prickwillow would inevitably have been seen. The unusual sight of the van out on an airing must have attracted attention. And if the van had been seen, those who saw it were certain to speak of it to those who did not. That expedition would come to the ears of Drownlands.

Knowing what she did, Zita was able to account for the dislike Drownlands showed to the presence of Mark Runham. The sight of the young man was a sting to his conscience. He would be afraid lest Zita, in conversation with him, might let drop something about the events of the night on which Jake Runham died.

But Zita was woman enough to see that there was another reason why the master of Prickwillow eyed the young fellow with dislike. He was jealous of him. Zita perceived that Drownlands liked her, at the same time that he feared her. She could discern in the expression of his eye, read in his consideration for her comfort, decipher in the quiver of his lips when Mark's name was mentioned, that his regard for her was deep, and that his dislike of Mark was due to jealousy.

Zita was accustomed to admiration; she had received a good deal of it in her public life, and regarded it with contemptuous indifference; but the admiration she had met with in market and fair had been outspoken; this of Drownlands was covert. Hitherto she had accepted it from her vantage-ground—the platform of her own habitation; now she was at a disadvantage—the inmate of the house of the man who looked on her with admiration.

She turned her thoughts again in the direction of Mark. What were the ties binding him to Kainie, of which he spoke?

On consideration, she thought she could understand. Mark had fallen in love with the girl at the mill when in hobbledehoydom, and had stupidly plunged into an engagement. Boys are fools; and he was but just emerged from boyhood. His father's death had knocked the nonsense out of his head, and brought him to the consciousness that he had made a blunder. He was now a rich farmer; Kainie had nothing of her own but the clothes she stood up in. Moreover, he had since seen Zita, and had become sincerely attached to her. So long as he was tied to that miller-girl, he could not speak of his wishes and purposes to Zita. He was in a dilemma; he was an honourable fellow, and could not break his word to Kainie. Mark was laying the case before Pip Beamish, and was inviting Pip to take Kainie off his hands, and set him free to speak out to Zita.

'Well,' thought the girl, as she put up Jewel in his stable, 'we all do foolish things; some of us do wrong things at times in our life. I have done both in one—I sold a box of paste-cutters at one and nine that cost father two shillings. I've had that threepence as hot coppers on my soul ever since. Well! I hope Pip Beamish will take Kainie. He loves her, and he's suited to her—both are millers; one has nothing and the other nought—so they are fitted for a match. I'll help matters on, or try to do so. I'll see Kainie, and have a deal with her—she is but one of the general public after all. I daresay she likes Pip quite as much as Mark, and is doubting in her mind which to have. I know what I can throw in to turn the scale.'

Accordingly, when the van had been consigned to its shed and the curtains removed to her room, Zita knitted her fingers behind her back and surveyed her goods, moving from one group of wares to another.

After some consideration, she descended the stairs and prepared to leave the house.

Mrs. Tunkiss peered out of the kitchen as she heard her step, and said—

'Going to meet the master—be you?'

A malevolent smile was on her face.

'No, Mrs. Tunkiss. I do not know in which direction he has ridden.'

'You'd like to know, would you? You'd go

and meet him, and he'd jump off his horse and walk alongside of you, and say soft things. Oh my! The master! Ki Drownlands say soft things!'

The woman burst into a cackling laugh.

'What do you mean?' asked Zita, reddening with anger at the insult implied in the woman's words.

'Oh, miss, I mean nothing to offend. But I'd like to know what the master will say to your carawaning about with Mark Runham—what the master will say to your receiving visits from young men in the poultry-house.'

'That is no concern of yours; and for the matter of that, I care nothing what he thinks.'

'Oh dear no! But folks can't carry on with two at once. Two strings to a bow may be all very well in some things. I don't mean to say that you shouldn't sow clover with your corn, and so have both a harvest of wheat and one of hay; but with us poor women that don't do. If it be a saying that we should have two strings to one bow, there is another, that there's many a slip between the cup and the lip.'

Zita pushed past the insolent woman.

Mrs. Tunkiss shouted after her, 'Strange goings on—so folks say. There's Mark Runham running after two girls, sweethearting both; and there's one girl—I names no names—running after two men, and I bet she catches neither.'

Then she slammed the kitchen door.

CHAPTER XIX.

NO DEAL.

THE insolence of the housekeeper made Zita for a while very angry. It followed so speedily on the scene in the van with Ephraim Beamish.

Her cheek burned as though it had been struck, and her pulses throbbed. She would like to have beaten Mrs. Tunkiss with one of the flails; but with creatures of that sort it is best not to bandy words, certainly not to give them the advantage by losing temper and acting with violence.

Zita did not long harbour her resentment. She had other matters to occupy her mind beside Mrs. Tunkiss.

The air was fresh and bracing to the spirits as well as to the body. Zita walked on with elastic tread, for she had recovered her good humour. She wore a neat white straw bonnet trimmed with black, and a white kerchief was drawn over her shoulders and bosom. Her

gown was black. She looked remarkably handsome. She had been accustomed to wear her gowns short, and her neat ankles were in white stockings. She was strongly shod; the snow brushed all the gloss off her shoes, but it was not whiter than her stockings. She walked along with a swing of the shoulders and a toss of the head that were peculiar to her, and characteristic of her self-confidence. The winter sun was setting, and sent its red fire into her face; it made her hair blaze, and brought out the apricot richness of her complexion.

When she reached the brick platform of Red Wings, Wolf did not bark, but ran to her, wagging his tail. She had not forgotten him. From her pocket she produced some bread. Then, in acknowledgment, he uttered a couple of sharp barks, and thrust his head against her hand for a caress.

Kerenhappuch, hearing the barks, came out and saluted Zita cordially.

'That's fine,' said she. 'Step inside. I was just going to brew some tea.'

'I'm here on business,' answered Zita. 'Let me sit down on one side of the fire and we'll talk about it. Let's deal.'

'Deal? What do you mean?'

Zita drew a stool to the fireside. The turf glowed red. The stool was low; when she seated herself, her knees were as high as her bosom. She folded her arms round them and

closed her hands, lacing her fingers together and looking smilingly over her knees at Kainie, with a gleam in her face of expectant triumph. Kainie knelt at the hearth and put on the kettle. She turned her head and watched Zita, whose features were illumined by the fire glow, as they had been shortly before by that of the setting sun. Kerenhappuch could not refrain from saying, 'What an uncommon good-looking girl you are!'

'Yes, so most folks say,' responded Zita, with indifference; 'and I suppose I am that.'

Kainie was somewhat startled at this frank acceptance of homage. She pursed up her lips and offered no further compliments.

'I suppose Pip Beamish is sweet on you,' said Zita,—'tremenjous?'

'Poor fellow!' sighed the girl of the mill. 'Perhaps he is, but it is no good. He has not got even a mill to look after now, and I have barely enough wage to keep me alive. What is more, the Commissioners are against him, and won't let him get any work in the fen any more.'

'Then let him go out of the fen?'

'Out of the fen?' exclaimed Kainie. 'How you talk! As if a fen-man could do that! You don't find frogs on top of mountains, nor grow bulrushes in London streets. That ain't possible.'

'But there are fens elsewhere.'

'Where?'

'I do not know. In America, I suppose. There is all sorts of country there, to suit all sorts of people. I'd go there if I were he.'

'If there are fens in America, that's another matter. But what is it you want with me, now, partick'ler?'

Zita settled herself in her seat.

'I've come to have a deal with you,' she said chirpily. 'That is what I have come about.'

'But—what do you want of me?'

'We will come to that presently,' said the Cheap Jack girl, and with her usual craft or experience she added, 'I will let you know what my goods are before I name the price.'

'Price—money? I have no money.'

'It is not money I want.'

'I do not fancy there's anything I require,' said Kerenhappuch. 'And that is fortunate, for I have not only no money to buy with, but no place where I could stow away a purchase.'

'Nobody knows what they wants till they see things or hear about them,' said Zita. 'Bless you! if you were as well acquainted with the British public as father and me, you'd say that. Take it as a rule, folks always set their heads on having what they never saw before, didn't know the use of, and don't know where to put 'em when they have 'em. I'm telling you this, though it is not to my advantage. Now, what do you say to a ream of black-edged paper and

mourning envelopes to match? — that's twenty quires, you know.'

'I write to nobody. I have no relations but my Uncle Drownlands, and he never speaks to me—won't notice me. I am not likely to write letters to him.'

'Then what do you say to a garden syringe? If you have a pail of soapsuds, it is first-rate for green-fly. Father sold several to gentlefolks with conservatories.'

'But I don't belong to the gentlefolks, nor have I got a conservatory.'

'No,' said Zita, rearranging herself on her seat. 'But if you wanted to keep folks off your platform, you could squirt dirty water over them.'

'I have Wolf. He is sufficient.'

'Well,' said Zita, with a slight diminution of buoyancy in her spirits and of confidence in her tone, 'then I'll offer you what I would not give every one the chance of having. I offer it to you as a particular friend. It's an epergne.'

'An epergne? What's that?'

'It is a sort of an ornament for a dinner-table. I will not tell you any lies about it. Father got it in a job lot, and cheap considering how splendid it is. It is not the sort of goods we go in for. It lies rather outside our line of business; and yet there's no saying whether it might not hit the fancy of General Jackass—I mean the public—that was father's way of talking of it.

You really can't tell what won't go down with him. Will you have the epergne?'

'I'm not General Jackass, and I won't have it.'

'But consider—if you was to give a dinner-party, and'—

'What? in the mill?'

'No; when you marry a rich man.'

'If I have any man, it will be a poor one.'

'Then,' said Zita in a caressing tone, 'I know what you really must have, and what there is no resisting. It is the beautifullest little lot of perfumes. They're all in a glass box, with cotton wool, and blue ribbons round their necks. There's Jockey Club—there's Bergamot—there's Frangipani—there's New-mown Hay—there's White Heliotrope, and there's Lavender too. I am sure there is yet another; yes, Mignonette. One for every day of the week. Think of that! You can scent yourself up tremenjous, and a different scent every day of the week. You cannot refuse that.'

'But,' said Kainie, with a wavering in her tone, a token of relaxation in resistance to the allurements presented to her imagination, 'what do you want for this?'

'One thing only.'

'What is that?

'Give up Mark.'

'Mark Runham?

'Yes. Mark Runham. Is it a deal between us? Now listen.' Zita held up one hand, and

began again with the catalogue of perfumes. 'There is Jockey Club for Sunday;' she touched her thumb. 'There is Bergamot for Monday;' she touched the first finger. 'There is Frangipani for Tuesday, and New-mown Hay for Wednesday'—

'Give up Mark?' Kainie interrupted the list. 'What do you mean?'

'What I mean is this,' said Zita: 'Mark told me that he was tied to you somehow.'

'He did? It is true.'

'But I want you to throw him up. Let him go free. Say that there is no bond between you. Think how you will smell, if you do! White Heliotrope on Thursday, then Lavender on Friday, and Mignonette on Saturday.'

'Did Mark say how we were tied—bound?'

'No; he only told me there was such a tie.'

'And Mark—did he set you to ask this?'

'No, not exactly. It is my idea. Now do. You shall have all the perfumes. Consider how on Sunday you will make the Baptist Chapel smell of Jockey Club!'

'Give up Mark? Break the bond? I can't. I could not, even if I would.'

CHAPTER XX.

DAGGING.

WHEN Zita returned to Prickwillow, Leehanna Tunkiss, with a malicious leer, said, 'The master is upstairs, and would like to speak with you;' then, with a sidelong look at the maid-of-all-work and a giggle, she curtseyed and added 'Miss.'

Zita ascended leisurely to her room, removed her bonnet and changed her shoes, put on an apron, and then proceeded to Drownlands' office. She did not hurry herself. She sauntered along the passage and hummed a folk-melody—'High Germany.' She stayed to shut a bedroom door that was ajar and swinging in the draught. She trifled with a canary that hung in a window.

The office door was open. She knew that Drownlands had heard her come in, had heard Mrs. Tunkiss inform her that she was wanted, heard her ascend the stairs. She knew that he was waiting with impatience whilst she removed bonnet and shoes, that he was chafing at the

leisurely manner in which she approached his den.

After a while she tapped at the half-open door in careless fashion, threw it open and stood in the doorway, and shrugged her shoulders, then rubbed her hands as though they were cold.

'Mrs. Tunkiss said you required my presence.'

'You have taken your time in coming.' Drownlands was at his table; he had been biting his fingers. There was a sheet of blotting paper on the board; he had scratched it, torn four strips out of it with his nails. His face was troubled and was working. 'Why did you not come at once?'

'I had to remove my shoes; they were wet. I did not suppose you were in much of a hurry.'

'Come inside. Why do you stand in the doorway?'

She obeyed.

'Well, is it necessary to leave the door wide open behind you?'

She closed the door.

'Shut it, I say.'

She obeyed, and leaned her back against the valve, crossed her feet, and put her hands behind her on the handle.

'Where have you been?' asked Drownlands imperiously.

'To Red Wings, to see your niece. You

don't know her. It is a pity. You should look after her; she is your own relation. She is not bad in her way, but awfully poor—and pig-headed too, which poor people oughtn't to be, because they can't afford it. I went to have a deal with her, but it was of no use. She would do no business with me.'

'Oh, you have gone back to your old profession of Cheap Jack, have you?'

'I never left it off. I Cheap Jack in my sleep and make thundering profits. It is disappointing to wake in the morning and see all the goods—and damaged ones too—on the shelves where they were the night before, after I had sold them off in my dreams at twenty-five and thirty per cent. profits. There's an epergne has been the nightmare to father and me. I wanted Kainie to take it, but she wouldn't. Suppose you buy it and present it to her, and so make peace and love between you?'

'Have done. I told you I did not wish you to know her.'

'But I went on business, and my time was wasted.'

'You have also been with that—that fellow.'

'Yes, with Mark. I took him out for a drive.'

'In the road, in the van?'

'Yes; the van wanted sweetening. The fowls have been roosting on it, and have treated it shamefully.'

'Be silent. What are you playing with behind your back?'

'I am playing with nothing. I am always at work or doing business. I never play.'

'And what work or business are you engaged on now?'

'I am polishing the handle of the door.'

'You not play? You never play?' exclaimed Drownlands, starting to his feet. 'You are always at play, and I am your sport. You play me as a fish, you dagg me like a pike. Look at this.'

He went to the corner of his room, and from the collection there thrown together produced a singular weapon or tool, locally termed a gleve.

'Do you know the use of this?'

'No.'

'It is for playing,' said Drownlands bitterly. 'See, there are six knives tied together by the handles at the head, and all the blades have been jagged like saws, the teeth set backwards. Can you guess its purpose?'

'No; it's not a woman's tool.'

'It is for playing—playing with pike. You take this and dagg into the water; you dagg and dagg, and bring up a pike or an eel wedged between these blades, cut into by these fangs. He cannot free himself; the more he twists and turns, the deeper into his flesh bite these teeth, and the greater is his anguish of heart.

That is play—play for him who does the dagging, not for the poor fish that is speared. And, Zita, such is your play. With your fingers, with your tongue, with your brown eyes, you dagg for me, and I am the miserable wretch whom you torture. It may be fun to you.'

'I do not make sport with you, master,' said Zita, with placidity of feature and evenness of tone in strong contrast with his working face and quivering voice.

'You are at that handle again. Polishing it! Leave off, or you will drive me mad. Can you not for one moment desist from tormenting me? You seek out occasion, means, to twang my every nerve, and give me pain.'

'Master Drownlands, listen to me,' said Zita. 'You are quite in the wrong when you say that I dagg for you. Lawk-a-biddy! I dagg for you? On the contrary, it is you who are dagging for me, and I have to dodge to this side, then to that, from your gleve, and as I happen to be sharp of eye and nimble in movement, you do not catch me. That is how the matter stands, and not at all as you represent it.'

'Who suffers?' asked Drownlands fiercely. 'Is it you, or is it I? You stand there, composed and complacent, rubbing up my door-handle behind your back, and all the while I am in torture. You cannot speak to me but you stick a dart; you cannot look at me but I feel the knife cutting; your very laugh causes a

wound, and your weapons are all poisoned, and the gashes fester. Here am I' (he flung the gleve back into the corner with an oath), 'your victim, your sport—in suffering.'

He returned to the table.

'Sit down,' said the girl. 'Do not work yourself into a passion. There's no occasion for that. Let us come to business.'

'Yes,' said Drownlands; 'that is the only way to deal with you. You have a sorry, commercial mind. Everything to you must be a matter of pounds, shillings, and pence.'

'That is the only way with me,' said Zita. 'I was brought up to trade, and I love to drive a bargain. That, if you like it, is sport; it is sport and business squeezed into one.'

'I will stand here,' said the man. 'You stand there by the door, if you will; only, I beseech you, leave off polishing that cursed handle, and reckoning, as I suppose you are, how many farthings to charge me for it. As you say that you love business, to business we will go. As nothing affects you but what is presented to your mind in a monetary light, to moneys we will proceed. We also will have a deal.'

'By all means,' said Zita, with a sigh of relief. 'Now I am on my own ground. Do you want to buy, sell, or barter?'

He did not answer immediately. He folded his arms and stood by the window jamb, looking over his shoulder at her.

The dusk had set in after the set of sun, but a silvery grey light suffused the room, the reflection of the snow on the ground. In this light he could see Zita. She had withdrawn her hands from the knob, and had them raised to her bosom, and was rubbing one palm against the other leisurely. A fine, clean-built girl. He also was a fine man, with strongly-cut features, picturesque, with his long black hair, his swarthy complexion, his sturdy frame, and the tiger-skin slung across his shoulders.

'Now I am ready,' said Zita.

He did not speak. He felt that much, everything, depended on what he said, and how he said it. His breath came quick, and his brow was beaded with perspiration.

'You are slow about it,' said Zita. 'Father took an agency once for an *Illustrated History of the War*. It was to be in twenty parts, at half a crown a part, and four beautiful steel engravings in each, of battles, and generals, and towns. That *Illustrated War* was such a long time in progress that some of the subscribers died, and others moved away, and some went bankrupt, and there was no getting their money out of some of the others. Father never would have anything more to do with concerns that did not go off smart like the snap of a percussion cap. It seems to me that this business of yours is going to be as long and tiresome as that of the *Illustrated War*.'

'You are dagging at me again,' said Drownlands sullenly.

'I cannot speak a word but it takes you contrariways,' observed the girl.

He left the window and came to the table, leaned his hand on it, and stood with his back to the light. Still unable to make up his mind to speak, or how to speak, he began to tear up the blotting-paper into little pieces and to throw them about, some on the floor, some on the board. When the last fragment had left his fingers—

'Zita,' he said in loud and vehement tones, 'I suppose I am twice your age.'

'I should fancy more than that—a good deal.'

'Be silent and listen to me.' He raised his voice. 'I am rich. I have a large tract of land—fen-land. I have turned over every turf, and under each found gold. But it has not made me happy. I have had many contradictions, many sorrows, and some shame. My life has been blistered and full of running sores. I have ever been seeking and never finding, till I saw you. When you came into my house, then I knew at once that it was you I had craved for and longed after, and that you, and you alone, could give me what I can find nowhere else—happiness.'

'Give?' said Zita. 'I thought this was a business matter.'

'Let me buy my happiness, then, at what

price you desire. I have told you what I am worth. When I see you, I feel the fire kindles in my heart; when I do not see you, it smoulders; and now—now I speak, it breaks out into raging flames.'

'I must leave this place, or you will go clean crazy.'

'No, you must not—you shall not leave it! I could not live without you, having once seen you. Zita, I must have you!'

'Me?' said Zita. 'With me go the van and the goods.'

'Curse the van!'

'You must not say that. The van is very fine, if the poultry would but leave it alone; and with the curtains and tassels is fit for a king.'

'Zita, it is you only that I want.'

'There are a lot of goods goes with me—scrubbing-brushes, mops, brooms, door-mats, pots and pans. Then there's Jewel—who is not bad when he does go.'

'You are trifling with me again. Listen to me. Hear me to the end.'

'I want to hear the end and have done with it,' said the girl. 'I was reckoning up the articles. Here's Cheap Jack Zita for one; there are all these promiscuous goods, that's two; here's the van, that's three; and there's Jewel, that's four—a job lot.'

'You are mocking me.'

'No indeed, I am not. We are after business, are we not?'

But Zita was purposely protracting the scene. She was in difficulties, and was searching to find a way out of them.

'Yes, business. You are mercantile. Listen to what I offer. I am rich, a man of consequence, and a Commissioner. Here is the house, here is the land. I have money in the bank—thousands of pounds; all—all I have is yours; give me but your own self in return.'

Zita was far from being unfeeling. She was stirred by the earnestness, the devotion of the man, but she was not for a moment doubtful as to what her answer must be. Commercial though her mind was, she could not accept him at his price. Her scruple was how to word her refusal so as least to wound him. In her peculiar fashion—one inveterate to her—she twisted the matter about so as to give it a comical aspect. She saw no other loophole for escape from a difficult and painful situation.

'I am sorry,' she said, 'that number one in the job lot is not to be parted with. That is withdrawn from the sale, or bought in. But if it is any consolation to you to have the van and a share of the goods'—

'That is no consolation to me.'

'A queer state of mind to be in—an unwholesome one, and looks like derangement of

intellects. The van ought to comfort any man with his faculties about him.'

'Zita!' exclaimed Drownlands, striking the table with his fist, 'you persist in fooling with me! I will not endure this. I am in deadly earnest. I know the reason of this trifling. Mark Runham'—he choked with passion—'Mark has stepped in, and you have given him that heart which you deny me—a heart I would give worlds—worlds'— He turned to the window. It was starlight now, starlight over snowfields. 'Look out, Zita, at the stars. It is said that they are worlds. If all these were mine, and filled with unimaginable masses of treasure, the homes of unexampled happiness, I would give all for you—all for you—listen to me—merely that I might call you mine, and then die.'

'I cannot be yours,' said Zita in a firm voice. 'And now that you have said this, I shall leave the house.'

'You shall not leave this house!' he cried fiercely. 'If you attempt it,—if I see that you are about to attempt it—and I know whither you would go,—then I will shoot you first, and myself afterwards.'

'I have to do, then, with a madman?'

'Be it so—with a madman; mad on one matter only, mad for one thing only—you. I make no empty threat. I swear by these stars I will do what I threaten. I cannot and I will

not live without you. I will kill you rather than that you should belong to another.'

Zita came forward from the door, came to the table.

'I can never be yours,' she said in a tone as earnest, as grave as his. 'There is that between us which makes it for ever impossible.'

'What is the *that*—Mark Runham?'

'No—not Mark Runham.'

'Who is it, then?'

'There is no *who*. There is a *something*. Must I tell you what it is? I would gladly spare you.'

'Tell me, and torment me no more.'

She stepped to the corner of the room, took the flail up, and cast it on the table between them.

'The *something* is that flail.'

Suddenly through the window smote a red flare; it kindled the room, it turned Zita's hair into a ruddy aureole, it streamed over the table, and dyed the flail blood-red.

And Drownlands cast himself on his knees, with a cry of anguish and remorse, and buried his face in his hands.

Then through the house sounded a hubbub of voices, and cries for the master.

"The *something* is that flail!"—p. 212.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE FEN RIOTS.

SEVERAL and various causes had combined to produce discontent in the Fens.

Those who lived by fishing and fowling were angry because the improved drainage had destroyed their sporting grounds. Those who had been left behind in the scramble for land were discontented because others had seized the advantageous moment for purchasing which they had let slip.

The labourers were discontented because of the lowness of the wage and the high price of corn. How was it possible for a man on ten or eleven shillings a week to maintain a family, when wheat was at four to five shillings a stone?

It is proverbial that such as have risen from poverty prove the harshest masters. Such was the case in the Fens. The landowners were related by blood and marriage to the labourers they employed, but, nevertheless, they ground

for the most part unscrupulous fishers in troubled waters. Of the few that were sincere, Ephraim Beamish was one.

All the elements of dissatisfaction were combined at the period of our tale, and the high price of wheat produced an explosion; but it was Ephraim Beamish who applied the match.

He had been expelled his office as keeper of a mill by the Commissioners, and his enforced idleness gave him leisure to pass from one centre of discontent to another, to stir up the embers, fan them to a white heat, and organise a general outbreak. On a preconcerted day, the labourers rose, and with them was combined a large body of men of no particular calling, who had no particular grievance, and no particular end in view.

No suspicion of danger was entertained by the employers, and when the dissatisfied broke out in open riot, they were taken by surprise and were unprepared to offer resistance.

Bodies of men assembled at Mildenhall, Soham, Isleham, Downham, and Littleport, and the order was given that they were to march upon Ely, and on their way were to extort from the farmers promise of higher wage and cheaper corn. In Ely contributions were to be exacted from the Bishop, the canons, and all the wealthy and well-to-do citizens. The mills were to be wrecked and the banks plundered.

pair of well-tanned leather boots reaching to the hips, that cost him from thirty-six shillings to two pounds the pair.

His comforts were small, and were disregarded by the landowners. His cottage, though quite modern, was supremely wretched. It had been run up at the least possible expense, one brick thick, and one room deep, on piles. But 'the moor' beneath the surface had shrunk through the drainage, and the walls gaped, letting wind and rain drive through the rents, and frost enter, impossible to expel by the largest fire.

There was then, as there is now, and always will be, a body of social failures—fraudulent dealers detected and exposed, but not shamed, men who, through their sourness of temper, or indolence, or dishonesty, had failed in whatever they took in hand. These were ready-made demagogues, all talkers, all dissatisfied with every person and thing save themselves, accusing every institution of corruption, and every person of injustice, because of their own incompetence. They were in their element when real discontent prevailed on account of real wrongs. They rose into influence as agitators; they worked on the minds of the ignorant peasantry, dazzling them with expectations impossible to be realised, and exciting them to a frenzy of anger against all who were in any way their superiors. These men were rarely sincere in their convictions. They were

submit to dictation from Beamish or any other man.

The tavern at Littleport could hardly escape, although it had been a rendezvous of the dissatisfied. The mob rushed towards it to break in and seize on the contents of the cellar. In vain did Beamish protest that they were injuring a good cause by their disorderly conduct; all desired drink, and none paid heed to his remonstrance.

The taverner barely averted having his house looted by rolling a hogshead of ale out of his doors, and bidding the rioters help themselves.

Then Beamish sprang on a bench and entreated the men to attend to what he had to say.

'We want no words,' said one of the rioters. 'We are dry, we want drink. We've empty pockets, and want to fill them. Our ears have been stuffed with words. Keep them for chapel on Sundays.'

'I will speak,' cried Beamish. 'I am your leader. You have sworn to follow and obey me. You elected me yourselves.'

'Lead us to liquor and sovereigns, and we'll follow sharp enough.'

'You are wasting time. You are damaging a righteous cause. Have we not to march to Ely? Have we not to visit the farmers on the way, and impose our terms there?'

'There's plenty of time for that, Pip.'

'There is not plenty of time. The Mildenhall men are on their way under Cutman, five hundred strong.'

'How do you know that?'

'It was so planned. The Isleham men are marching under Goat, the Soham men under Gotobed. Who will be first in Ely? Is Littleport, that should lead the way, to come in at the tail?'

'There is something in that, mates,' shouted one of the rioters. 'Stand in order, you chaps. To Ely! Bring along the waggon.'

The idea that, if looting were to be done, they of Littleport might come in merely to glean where others had reaped, and the consciousness that a far richer harvest was awaiting them in Ely than could be garnered in Littleport, acted as a stimulus, and the mob desisted from further violence, and roughly organised itself into marching order. All were armed after a fashion, with guns, pitchforks, cudgels, leaping-poles, and cleavers; and as the day was declining, there was a cry for torches.

'We shan't want them,' called one of the men. 'We'll light bonfires on our way.'

Then a waggon was drawn out. In it were stationed some fowlers with duck-guns. The object of the waggon was to serve as a sort of fortress. Those in it were above the heads of the rest, and, in the event of resistance or an attack, could fire over their heads. Moreover,

the waggon would be serviceable to carry the spoil taken on the way, or gathered in Ely.

Then the mob rolled along the great drove or highway to the city, with shouts, and oaths, and laughter, and trampled the snow as it advanced, leaving a black slush behind it.

Many of the men were half intoxicated with the ale and spirits they had already imbibed, and all were wholly drunk with lust of gain and love of destruction.

Then one in the waggon shouted, 'To Crumbland!' Another shouted, 'No, no! Young Runham is not bad. He has sold his wheat cheap and thrashed out all his stacks. And the old woman is a widow.'

'That's nought,' exclaimed a third, 'if there's any liquor to be had there!'

'To Gaultrip's!' was the cry.

'Gaultrip is my cousin!' shouted another.

'That's nought,' called one of the mob. 'I suppose he has money.'

'Ely way!' roared Beamish, scrambling into the waggon. 'Drive ahead. What's the use of being the commander, if nobody listens to the word of command, and nobody thinks of obeying it, if he does hear it?'

CHAPTER XXII.

TWENTY POUNDS.

THE shrill voice of Mrs. Tunkiss was heard, as she ran screaming up the stairs, calling for 'the master.' Then she burst into his room, followed by the maid-of-all-work, who was in convulsive jerks.

'Oh, master! there is a riot. Some of our men have joined, and there is a stack on fire at Gaultrip's. The mob is coming here, and threatens to burn us.'

'Who are coming?' asked Drownlands, looking up. He staggered to his feet, but was as one dazed. He did not observe the glare in the room. He did not hear distinctly the words spoken.

'Look, master! look at the blaze. It is at Gaultrip's. You can hear them coming on. They are swearing horrible, and say they will have our lives.'

'What is this all about?'

'I don't know for certain. Tom Easy has

run here afore to tell us what he has gathered. But lawk! poor lad, he's frightened; and me—my poor head won't hold it. He says the mob be armed with bombs and cannons, and all sorts of engines of war, and they'll blow us up into the skies.'

Drownlands passed his hand over his eyes, then went to the window and looked out.

He saw in the distance the red blaze of a burning rick, the flames dancing and leaping in the air, and carrying with them wisps of ignited straw, which were borne on the wind as fire-brands, to carry destruction elsewhere. He could see the mob advancing as a ripple of fire running along the drove before a dark wave. The rioters had, in fact, twisted up bands of straw, had lighted them, and were waving them as torches as they advanced, and the flames were reflected in the dykes on each side of the road. Drownlands was surprised. He threw up the sash, and the roar of voices was carried into the room.

'What is the meaning of this?' asked he. 'Who are these that are coming this way?'

'It is the rioters,' answered Mrs. Tunkiss.

'Rioters? What rioters?'

'Lawk! how can I tell? Tom Easy said they want advance of wages, and cheap flour. And he said, they ask for money to help on the cause.'

'Cause? What cause?'

'Lawk, sir! how can I say? Tom Easy said it was the Union of Fen Labourers, and they will have blood or money. They will make you swear to pay them two shillings a-day more wage, and pull the price of flour down to half a crown.'

'They demand money of me, do they? Let them venture to require it of me.'

'Here they are!' screamed Mrs. Tunkiss, as a blow was levelled at the door, and the strokes resounded through the house.

'Who was that?' shouted Drownlands from the window, with a curse. He was not a man to spare oaths when he was angry. 'Who struck my door? I will have the law of him.'

The mob was pouring into the yard.

'Make a blaze, and let us see the old tiger!' shouted one of the rioters, and bunches of straw and corn were snatched from a rick, a blaze was made, and fire tossed about, illumining the face of the house and the figures of the men in the waggon.

'By heaven, I know you!' shouted Drownlands from the window. 'That is Aaron Chevell in the waggon, and by him Isaac Harley and Harry Tansley with guns. I'll not forget you. I have a memory. I have five ash trees on the drove side, and I shall have a rioter slung to every branch of every tree, and shall begin with my own workmen.'

'Hold a civil tongue in your head!' shouted

Chevell from the waggon. 'Don't threaten what you can't perform. We have guns here, as you see, and can silence you; and we shan't think twice about doing so, if you do not come to our terms.'

'Master Drownlands!' called Ephraim Beamish, working his way forward in the waggon with his long arms, and leaning his elbows on the front board when he had thrust himself into the middle position, 'you will gain nothing by abuse and threats. We have a good cause, and are a thousand strong to support it. You have had everything in the Fens your own way too long, and have trampled the working men under foot. You have coined their sweat into silver'—

Some one shouted as a correction, 'Into gold.'

'Yes,' said Beamish; 'you have coined the sweat of your men into heavy gold, and have left the men to hunger, and toil, and nakedness; to cramp, and ague, and fever. They have their rights as well as you. They have borne their wrongs long enough. Now they have risen to demand what in equity is theirs—some share of the profits, some just proportion out of your gains, so that they may live in comfort, and not barely live.'

'Shut your mouth!' roared one of the crowd; 'we want no preaching now. We knows our rights, and we'll maintain them with our fists, and not with your tongue. Pip thinks he'll convert Tiger Ki, he does! Words won't do

that. Send a shot at him, Tansley. That's the only argument for him.'

Tansley, the man addressed, thrust Beamish back with the butt-end of his fowling-piece, and laid his barrel on the front board.

'Listen, Master Drownlands,' shouted Beamish, again making an effort to shoulder his way to the front of the waggon. 'What we ask of you is twenty pounds for the cause of the United Fen Labourers. Give us twenty pounds, and swear to the conditions—a fair wage and cheap corn. Then we will do you no harm whatever. We will take your money, and move along our way. We are bound for Ely.'

'I pay you twenty pounds?' yelled Drownlands. 'I have a gun as well as you have, and will contribute lead to the cause—lead only.'

He ran to the corner of the room and took down his gun from the rack.

'I'll shoot,' threatened Tansley.

'Ay—and so will I,' said Drownlands, 'and let us see who can take the best aim. I think my eye is pretty well known to be sharp and my hand steady. By the Lord, I'll not spare you!' He paused and put on a hat. 'I can see finely with all those wisps of fire. Hold up your torches, boys, higher, that I may send my bullet into Tansley's heart. He will leap, and then down he goes.'

Fallen pieces of ignited straw had kindled the half-kneaded straw on the ground, and there

ran flames and half-flames to and fro on the soil. The cart-horses in the waggon started and shifted position to escape these flashes and flickers.

'Drownlands!' shouted a young voice, and Mark Runham thrust his way through the crowd. 'I pray you be reasonable. You will provoke bloodshed.'

'What, you there? You a ringleader in riots?' exclaimed Drownlands, lowering his fowling-piece.

'I am not that. Let me come within.'

Then Mark stood on the waggon-shafts and called to the crowd—

'Refrain from violence! Leave me to manage Master Drownlands. I will engage him to let you have the money you require.'

Then he jumped down from the shafts and ran up the steps.

The door had been bolted and chained by the housekeeper, but Zita, hearing what Mark said, without waiting for orders, descended to the ground floor, and unbarred the door, and admitted him. He ran upstairs, for no time was to be lost. The mob was restless and irritated. It was impatient to be on its way to Ely, and yet was reluctant to leave Prickwillow without having drawn money from it, or done some mischief.

Drownlands was too angry to listen to advice. He would not hear of coming to terms with the rabble. He had been too long accustomed to

domineer over the labourers to fear them now. He in no way realised how much courage is given by association in numbers.

'What are you here for? How dare you enter uninvited?' he exclaimed, as Mark came into the office, followed by Zita.

'I admitted him,' said the girl. 'He has come in your interest.'

'He is one of the rioters! He is a leader! A Runham of Crumbland, with a tail of dirty scoundrels after him, burning, pillaging, and getting drunk.'

'I beseech you,' said Mark—'I entreat you to listen to reason. The men are, as you say, drunk—drunk with folly. I am no leader.'

'You are acting for them.'

'I am an intermediary. They have spared me. They came to Crumbland, but we humoured them, brought out cake and ale, and they went their way without molestation. Gaultrip resisted, and they set fire to a stack, and so frightened him that he yielded, and paid fifteen pounds. Now he is engaged in saving his other stacks. Do not provoke these fellows further.'

'I will not listen to you. You ought to be ashamed to take the part of these scurvy ragamuffins.'

'I am not taking their part, but yours. Hark!'

There was a cry from the yard of, 'Drown-

lands! Tiger Ki! We will break in the house door unless you give us money.'

Then a brick was thrown. It crashed through the double panes of the window with raised sash, and fell in the room, accompanied by a shower of glass splinters.

'I will shoot one of them!' exclaimed the yeoman, and he ran with his gun to the window.

Mark had just time to strike up the barrel, and the contents were discharged in the air, hurting nobody.

Drownlands turned on him with an oath.

'I will punish you,' he said, stamping with fury, and he rushed upon Mark with his gun raised over his head, grasping it by the barrel.

Then Zita sprang between them, holding the flail in both her hands, as a ward against the stock.

'Stand back, Mark!' she cried. 'He dare not touch you across this flail.'

It was as she said.

The man stood as one paralysed, the uplifted gun in his hands, his eyes glaring at young Runham, and the red reflections of the fire flashing on his face and turning it to blood. But the blow did not fall. His muscles remained immovable, the gun suspended in the air, till Zita lowered the flail, and put it behind her back. Then the spell was off him. He let the gun fall on the ground, and his head sank on his bosom.

The discharge of the fowling-piece had produced a hush in the voices outside.

None knew whether, in the darkness, some one had been hit. But when, after a pause, it was found that no harm had been done, then there broke forth loud cries and execrations; the courage of the rabble rose with a sense of its immunity, and a rain of brickbats beat against the windows of the house, shivering the panes. The kitchen-maid fell on the floor in a fit. Mrs. Tunkiss went into a series of shrieks. Renewed blows were raised against the house door, and they were accompanied with cries of, 'Smash it in! Tear the tiger's house down! He has hundreds of pounds put away somewhere. If he will not pay twenty sovereigns when we ask civil, we will take two hundred.'

Then one shrill voice cried, 'Make a bonfire of the wheat ricks.'

'Ki Drownlands! will you do nothing?' asked Mark; 'will you not give up a few pounds to save those long ranges of stacks?'

'Let them do their worst,' answered the master of Prickwillow doggedly. 'By the light of the fire I will note every face, and mark them all down, man by man, and then woe betide them.'

Then a burst of cheers, and cries of, 'That will do famously. We will have that out. Get horses, harness, and we will drive to Ely.'

Zita ran to the window, and returned hastily with a blank face.

'They have found my van! They have got in-

side. They are clambering on the roof. They are treating it worse than poultry! Oh, Mark! Mark!'

Then through the window she pleaded, 'Spare my van. Here are ten gold sovereigns.' Then to Mark, 'Take my money, go to the men, and get them to leave my darling, precious van alone.'

'Stay,' said Drownlands. 'I have changed my mind.' He went to the door and summoned the domestics who had fled when the brickbat crashed into the room. 'Come here, Leehanna. Sarah, get out of your fits and come at once. Come here, Tom Easy.'

The frightened servants obeyed.

'Bring a candle,' he said.

The scared housekeeper did as required.

When Drownlands had received the light, he went into the passage, and, holding it before the face of Mark, said to the domestics, 'Do you know who this is? Is not this Mark Runham? Can you swear to it?' He paused for an answer to each question.

'He has come here, pushed his way into my house, against my wishes, to force me to contribute twenty pounds towards the cause of the rioters. He threatens me with the burning of my ricks if I do not comply. Is it not so?'

'I have come,' said Mark, 'because I am desirous to save you, as well as others in your house, from injury; and also to intervene and protect these misguided men against committing a crime.'

'They touched nothing at Crumbland.'

'No; we gave them food and drink.'

'Yes, you are hand and glove with them. And now you are acting as their spokesman and their leader. Take my money—twenty pounds, and take Zita's ten pounds—thirty pounds in all, the plunder of this house. Mind you, I give it on compulsion. I do not find meat and liquor for the rioters; I do this to save my ricks of corn. And I give it to you, Mark Runham, acting for the rioters.'

Drownlands turned to those present.

'I call upon you all to witness, you, Leehanna Tunkiss, you, Sarah, you, Tom Easy, and you, Zita, that I pay over my twenty pounds against my will. Open your hand, Mark Runham. Let them see that you have there my twenty pounds and Zita's ten pounds. There are the sovereigns all in gold. They are well spent—well spent—they rid me of you.'

A few moments later a shout rang from the crowd without—'Tiger Ki has shelled out. For the Union, for the Cause! for the fen-labourers! Twenty pounds! Twenty pounds for liberty and right! The cheap loaf and the big wage! Hurrah! hurrah, boys! Forward to Ely! On to the banks. On to the mills!'

Drownlands looked after the retreating mob from his window, and said, with a sneer, 'Go on—to the gallows, Mark Runham; I am clear of you now. Cheap at twenty pounds.'

CHAPTER XXIII.

TEN POUNDS.

NOTWITHSTANDING the call of 'On to Ely!' the mob was not at once in motion. Something delayed it.

Zita went to the window and looked out. She saw that which excited and angered her, and, turning her head to Drownlands, said—

'It is a shame! It is disgraceful! They have taken my ten pounds, and yet they are carrying off my van. They have put Jewel into the shafts. They might as well have harnessed the Archbishop! He's stiffening his legs and setting back his ears. Look how he's cocking his tail. They will have to drag on van and Jewel together. What a thing the general public is! I never knew it in this mood before, and yet I thought I knew it pretty well. I'll clear the public out of my van. There are a dozen inside, and a score on the roof. They have no right to do this after accepting my money.'

She left the window.

'Zita, where are you going?' asked Drownlands.

'Going to send the general public skipping,' she answered.

'You cannot do it. It is not safe to leave the house.'

'Trust me. I've swept the poultry off, and I'm not afraid of the public. I know how to deal with them as I do with fowls.'

Before Drownlands had time to offer further remonstrance, she had darted out of the office, run to her own room, taken a pair of fencing foils from the stores, had descended the stairs two steps at a time, had unbarred the door and was out in the yard, making for the van.

'Stand still—don't move,' she said to Jewel, as she passed his head; and he turned one of his eyes at her and winked.

'Clear away at once,' she shouted to those around the van. 'You have taken my money, and must let the conveyance alone.'

'Who are you? We've no money of yours.'

'Yes, you have. I sent out ten pounds to you. Go, ask your commander, secretary, treasurer, or whatever you call him. He has pocketed my ten pounds, and you are bound to leave my van alone. I am the Cheap Jack girl.'

'Are you the daughter of the Cheap Jack who died here?'

'Yes, I am; and this is my van. Hands off. You have no quarrel against me. What have I

done to make bread dear and keep wages low? I do not belong to these parts. Stand aside.'

She thrust her way to the back of the van where was the glass door. This had been opened, and several men had ensconced themselves inside on the benches.

Zita entered, a foil in each hand. Within it was dark, but she nevertheless knew that the interior was packed full of men.

'This is my conveyance,' she said imperiously; 'you have no more right to enter it than you have to occupy the house of the Lord Mayor. I have got a sword in each hand. I cannot see any one in the dark, but I will dagg with each hand, as you dagg for eels, and I will go on dagging till I have got a man wriggling at the end of each.'

Down went the front of the van, and out tumbled a dozen lusty men, one over another, stumbling, falling, sprawling, in the trampled snow and straw.

Zita went through the van from aft to fore, and satisfied herself that it was cleared of its human occupants. Then, standing on the platform, which had been thrown forward by those who burst away from her foils, she looked up at the roof. A score of men and youths was on it, their legs pendent.

'Down with you at once,' she said. 'Do you see these rapiers? Do you think I can't run a man through as easy as stick a needle in a pin-

cushion? It's not the running in—it's the pulling out is the trouble. There's a button at the end of each blade. I have got only two—so I can pin but two of you, and that shall be the last two that leave the roof.'

She made as though about to scramble on to the top of the van, and away went the men seated there, dropping like ripe pears from a tree.

Zita leisurely reclosed the front of the van, and went out at the back and shut that door also.

'That's a good job done, Jewel,' said she. 'Now run the van backwards into the shed, and you shall return to the stable. Roman candles, Jewel—pop-bang! Roman candles at your nose.'

'Hold there, you Cheap Jack girl!' shouted a broad-shouldered man, coming up and laying his hand on the bit. 'We have taken this conveyance for the Union. It is confiscated.'

'Whether taken and confiscated I cannot say,' said Zita. 'But I know I have paid ten pounds to have it untaken and set at liberty. Return my ten sovereigns if you take from me my van.'

'We have no ten sovereigns of yours.'

'Yes, you have. And a shame it is that you should rob a poor Cheap Jack girl. Not that she belongs to the general public, save and deliver us!—but she is a working girl, and poor.'

'We have had no money of yours, and we

requisition the van. We want to load it in Ely. It will serve our purpose better than a waggon.'

'You shall not have it,' replied Zita. 'Fair trade is fair trade, and he that will not deal honourably I will run through, and leave the button sticking between his shoulders, and that will spoil a good weskit.'

The man sprang back as she threatened him with one of the foils.

'I will tell you what it is,' said Zita; 'you will not believe me till I have made an example of one of you.'

'Where is your ten pounds?' asked Pip Beamish, who had descended from the waggon.

'Ay,' said several of those who stood round; 'that is what we should uncommon like to know.'

'Where are my ten pounds?' repeated Zita. 'That is a fine question for you to put to me, when I'll be bound you have them in your pocket.'

'Bring them out, Pip!' called one of the men.

'I have not got her money. I have not touched it,' protested the commander.

'I gave it to Mark Runham along with the master's twenty pounds.'

'The twenty pounds has been put into the Union box—I never touched your ten.'

'Come, come, Pip,' said a cluster of men, 'no shuffling. Mark wouldn't have held back the money. You have had it, sure enough.'

'I have not had one farthing of it.'

'I paid ten pounds to have my van set at liberty. I did not wish to have it sat upon, and the sides kicked, and the varnish scratched. I gave ten pounds to save it from that.'

'What did you get, Beamish?' asked Aaron Chevell.

'I got just twenty pounds and no more—the twenty pounds that Drownlands contributed, and that I put into the box with the rest.'

'And not my ten?' exclaimed Zita. 'That is a falsehood. My ten was with his twenty. Thirty pounds in all, in gold.'

'There has been cheating,' shouted two or three.

'That is what comes of jaw and preaching.'

'Mates,' said Aaron Chevell, 'we must not let this pass. Let us have judge and jury. There has been robbery of the common fund. Mates, I vote that we arrest Pip Beamish, and try him at once.'

'Have him up in the cart,' said Tansley. 'Comrades all! light some more straw wisps. There has been a case of roguery. There has been our chief officer taking the money that was contributed to the Union, and pocketing it for his private use. I charge Ephraim Beamish, and vote that he be deposed from his command, and be tried for felony.'

'I second it,' shouted Isaac Harley. 'And what I say is—like enough. He who wants

the waggon wi' you. And, lads, hold up the torches that I may see if they looks honest and truthful. You — Leehanna Tunkiss — did this Cheap Jack girl give ten pounds for us into the hands of Beamish?'

'Oh yes! forty!' exclaimed the woman, who did not understand what was being done, and thought she might be incriminating Zita, or doing her some harm by the admission.

'She don't quite agree about the figure,—she says forty,—but she establishes the fact,' said Chevell, addressing the crowd. 'You swear to it?'

'Oh, I swear!' exclaimed Mrs. Tunkiss. 'Oh, gentlemen, let me down! I shall faint.'

'Pass her down,' ordered Aaron. 'Now you other — Sarah Gathercole — did she give him money? She shakes her head—I mean she nods.'

'She has the Vitus' dance,' protested the accused.

'She understands what's she's axed—eh?'

The poor girl nodded in her nervous fit.

'And you swear to it—the Cheap Jack girl gave ten pounds?'

Again she went into fits of jerking and nodding.

'She's mighty sure of it, that she be,' said Aaron. 'What say you, mates and chums? Is it proved?'

A roar in response, in the affirmative.

'Now then,' said Chevell, 'it is for Pip Beamish to answer in his defence.'

'I never had more than twenty pounds. Search me if you will.'

'You may have been too sharp for that,' said Isaac Harley. 'Mates, he ain't got a defence. I vote for condemnation. This Pip Beamish has been terribly stuck up, and has given himself the airs of a dook, and has been ordering us about. I vote that he is a thieving rascal. What say you?'

'Hear! hear! We say the same!' Then ensued shouts of, 'Kick him down! Duck him! Chuck him into the Lark!'

In a moment Beamish was plucked out of the waggon, flapping his long arms in protest and entreaty, was jostled, beaten, kicked, and finally thrown into the dyke — the one honest and sincere man among the leaders of the rabble.

'Now then, mates,' called Chevell, 'it is right and proper that we should elect another commander.'

'We want no commanders!' shouted the mob. 'We know what we want! We will all be commanders! Are we not the general public?'

'Then I vote,' cried Harley, 'that we lose no more time, but move on to Ely.'

Zita was helped out of the cart. The improvised torches were set in motion, forming a line of fire as the whole mob of rioters left the

farm, and marched along the dark embankment, whilst the waggon bounced below on the drove.

As Zita stood by the van, which she had thrust back with the aid of Jewel into the shed, a hand was laid on hers.

'Zita!'

The voice was that of Mark.

'Oh, Mark!'

'Zita, here are your ten pounds. I did not give them to Beamish.'

'Mark! and he has been deposed, and cuffed and beaten, for having stolen it.'

'He has been thrown into the dyke, and I have helped him out of the water. Do not be disconcerted. I could not have done him a better turn than this, to get him out of association with men who are running their heads into hangmen's nooses.'

CHAPTER XXIV.

A NEW DANGER.

'MARK, how was it that you did not give them my ten pounds?'

'Why, my dear Zita, I thought I could get them off without it. I gave them Drownlands' twenty. He escaped cheap at that price, and twenty pounds is nothing to him. I made sure I could induce them to leave your van alone without payment to do so, and when I saw them harness Jewel to it, then I was quite certain they would have to leave it; you do not suppose I would have suffered those rascals to take your money except in an extremity? To rob you was to rob me, Zit—for I never would have suffered you to lose those ten pounds. If I had been constrained to give them up, I would have refunded this sum to you out of my own pocket.'

'You are very good.'

'Not at all. I have more money than I know how to spend.'

'You are good all round. You pulled Pip Beamish out of the water, and I know you do not love him.'

'You see I help one I love, and one I do not love.'

Zita coloured. 'I did not mean that.'

'Then I do,' said Mark roguishly. 'You are in the right in this, that I do not love Beamish, —for one thing, because I think him a perverse, meddlesome, mischievous, discontented donkey, and for another, because of Kainie.'

'Kainie again?' exclaimed Zita, drawing back.

'Yes, because I do not choose to have him running after her.'

'Why should he not run after her as well as you?'

'Because he can never make her happy.'

'And you can?'

'I can try,' said Mark.

'Well, that is frank!' said Zita, huffed. 'You called me "Dear Zita," just now—I suppose it is "Dear Kainie" as well.'

'My dear Zita'—

'Perhaps you will keep your "dears" for her, or any one else who cares to have them and share them with others. I do not wish to be so termed. I refuse to be so called.'

She turned to leave. He caught her by the arm.

'Do not be cross. I cannot explain matters

now. It is all right. I did not mean to offend you.'

But Zita would not speak. She hastened to the house with pouting lips, burning cheeks, and sunken eyes. As she entered, she encountered Drownlands, in his slouched hat, and wearing a long great-coat in place of his usual tiger-skin. He held a whip in his hand, and had a pistol sticking out of his breast pocket.

'Are you going out?' asked the girl.

'Yes. You are in no further danger. The rabble will not return. I shall follow them.'

'Why so?'

'To bring all I can to the gallows. I shall watch every man I know, and see what his proceedings are. I shall take account of every act of lawlessness. They have not had my twenty pounds for nothing. I shall get some satisfaction in return. In Ely folks will be too much alarmed, the faces will be too strange for there to be recognition of offenders. That is my work. I shall witness against them, man by man, beginning with my own labourers who have revolted against me. I have purchased the right with my twenty pounds — a life for every pound—ha! ha!'

Then, looking steadily into Zita's eyes, he said in a low, bitter tone, 'I shall begin with Mark Runham.'

'Mark?' echoed the girl. 'He has done no harm.'

'Has he not? He entered my house uninvited. He acted for the rioters. He was their mouthpiece. He extorted money from me for them.'

He struck his boot with his whip, strode faster, then turned on the doorstep and said, 'If not the gallows for Mark, then transportation. I am well rid of him. See what it is for a man to venture himself in my way.'

Zita was startled. What had Mark done to incur the penalties of the law? Was it conceivable that Drownlands was in earnest? He made idle menaces. He had threatened to string the rioters to every bough of his five ash trees. He had not done it, and he could not do it. His present menace was as empty.

She watched the master ride forth from the stable when he had saddled his horse himself. No man was left on the premises to attend on him. The boy, Tom Easy, was too frightened to be of service, and Drownlands was impatient to be off.

As the farmer rode past the door, he turned his face towards Zita, but in the darkness she could not see its expression.

He pointed in the direction of Ely with his whip, and at that moment Zita heard a roar of voices, followed by an explosion of firearms borne upon the wind. In fact, the rioters had reached the metropolis of the Fens. They had let the waggon precede the marching body.

The front board had been notched to receive the fowling-pieces, and the insurgent labourers, on reaching the main street, had announced their entry by a discharge of firearms and a ringing shout, calculated to strike terror into the hearts of the citizens.

Zita did not remain long inactive, listening to the sounds of uproar in the distance.

'Sharp! a pail!' she called to the quaking kitchen-maid. 'There is no reason why you should be idle, or I either, because a parcel of men are making fools of themselves.'

'A pail? What can you want a pail for at such a time as this?' asked Mrs. Tunkiss. 'You ought to be down on your knees praying.'

'You would want a pail, and soap, and water, and a scrubbing-brush, Leehanna, if you had been drawn out into the yard, and had had a score of bumpkins sitting on your back and kicking your sides with their dirty boots. I am not going to let my van remain all night in its present condition, to have the clay caked over it in the morning, just because wheat is up and wages down, and folks don't like to have it so. I will clean the van before I go to bed.'

Mrs. Tunkiss and Sarah were too much overcome to render assistance. Sarah was shaking and jerking in every limb, and Leehanna had got down her Bible to read about the fire and brimstone rained on the cities of the plain, and

the escape of Lot, and to conceive herself to be a female Lot. Zita furnished herself with what she required, and set vigorously to work, commenting as she went on upon the bruises and scratches in the varnish and paint, which the sides of the van had received from the boots of those who invaded it that evening.

She was engaged on the roof of the van, when, all at once, her thoughts took a different direction, and, kneeling upright, scrubbing-brush in one hand and a piece of soap in the other, she exclaimed—

'That was impudence, if you please! to tell me he did not approve of Pip going after Kainie, and that he will do his utmost to make her happy! Does he think he can have us both? That may be fen ways, it isn't caravan morals. Hark!—what is that?'

She could hear the alarm bell of Ely Minster pealing.

'There was a song of father's that I mind,' said Zita, still kneeling upright, 'and if Mark had only been brought up in a van instead of desultory-like on the Fens, he'd have learned the things he ought to do, and the things he ought to leave alone, taught him by songs and other ways.' She sang—

'Young men, be advised, if love gets in your sconce,
Don't ever go courting two maidens at once;
With one you may work along safely and sound,
'Twixt two stools you're certain to come to the ground.'

A lurid glare was in the sky over Ely, and the bell continued to peal its note of distress.

The thoughts of Zita reverted to the threat of Drownlands. He had said he would bring Mark to the gallows, or, at all events, send him into transportation.

This had seemed to her at the time an idle threat, as the empty explosion of anger, that could do no harm, whilst it relieved the master's chafed feelings. But as she turned the matter over in her head, it appeared to her no longer as trifling a concern as she had at first supposed it to be.

Mark had entered the house, and had induced the master to part with his money to save his ricks from being burnt down, and his house from being broken into. This fact was capable of two interpretations. Mark's purpose had been obvious enough to her; but it was quite possible for his action to be misrepresented as one of sympathy with the rioters, and his interposition as being due to his having been appointed by them to act in their behalf.

Zita was now able to comprehend the purport of Drownlands calling up the servants to look at Mark, and to witness the payment of the money. And at the same time she realised the force of his words when he said that he had paid the money to be rid of Mark. She could penetrate to the inner chambers of Drownlands' heart, and read there his thoughts and intentions.

If Mark were removed, it was likely that Zita would prove more pliable. She would feel her loneliness, her isolation, and be driven to accept him as her protector. Zita was very angry when these ideas rose in her mind. She thought it incumbent on her to seek Runham and warn him to be on his guard, especially to avoid having any more connection with the rioters. Drownlands had gone in the wake of the mob; so, possibly, had Mark, out of curiosity—out of a wish to intervene, as he had intervened at Prickwillow.

Zita put down the pail, and, instead of returning to the house, walked down the road that led from the farm into the main drove by the side of the Lark embankment.

CHAPTER XXV.

'I DON'T CARE THAT!'

ZITA was now seriously alarmed. She knew that Drownlands was one who was without scruple in carrying out the ends at which he aimed.

He had not let drop these ominous words at random. He hated Mark with deadly animosity, and Zita knew very well the reason. He loved her, and considered that Mark stood in his way. He hoped, she did not question, that by removing Mark there would remain no other serious obstacle in the way of his suit. Drownlands would not have recourse to violence. The remembrance of what he had done to the young man's father precluded that; but he would not hesitate to adopt any other means that promised to relieve him of his rival.

Zita had formed no plan as to what she would do. She walked in the direction of Ely, on the chance of catching Mark up, or of finding some one who could inform her whether he had

returned home to Crumbland, or had gone on after the army of the discontented. She had not walked a quarter of a mile before she saw two figures standing on the embankment against the illumined sky.

Zita was below, in the drove, and in shadow. The roadway that had been snowy was now trampled black, and a person walking or standing on it would be invisible to those on the bank, whereas the latter were in full view to such as were on the drove, and their every movement was made distinct by the reflection in the sky of the fires kindled by the rioters in Ely.

Zita hardly, if at all, considered this. She did not at first know who these persons were who were pencilled against the red light behind them. She had no reason for remaining concealed, but she walked on a dark surface, and was therefore invisible, and trod in springy peat, so that her step was inaudible.

Before she could distinguish by their faces who the two were upon the embankment, she had discovered their personalities by their voices. One was Mark Runham and the other was Kainie.

Stung by jealousy, and instinctively, Zita stood still. She heard Kainie say, 'I wish you would go after him, Mark.'

Then she heard Runham answer, 'I cannot, and I will not. I picked him out of the dyke, streaming with fen-water—out of the dyke into

which his own comrades had flung him—and in spite of all this he follows them. Such a fellow as that is past helping. No one but Pip, after being head, would consent to draggle at the end of the body as its tail. What is more, Kainie, I do not like your interesting yourself in him. He is not for you. He has too many maggots in his brain. There is no place will suit him. Wherever he goes he will be in opposition. Kainie, do you know the old country-dance tune of "The Clean Contrary Way"? Well, that is the only strain to which Pip will caper.'

'Poor Pip! He is not a bad fellow at heart.'

'Maybe; but he is terribly perverse. Possibly he would be satisfied if he were translated to what they call the Antipodes, for there his head would be pointing where our feet run, and his toes would be aiming in the direction of our heads. Once for all, I am not going into Ely after Pip. It is of no use, and my mother is in alarm. I must return to appease her fears. Now, Kainie, a word to you about yourself.'

'What about me?'

'Why, this: How long do you intend to remain at Red Wings?'

'As long as I must. I suppose my uncle Drownlands will do nothing for me.'

'But I will. You can have any money you want from me.'

'I do not require it. I am happy at the mill. I shall not leave it yet a while. I certainly

expect nothing from Uncle Ki. He never casts me even a good-day. It is hard for me to suffer because he quarrelled with my mother. I do not suppose I shall ever be the better for my relationship to him. Folks say he is going to marry the Cheap Jack girl.'

Zita heard Mark's laugh, and then his answer. 'She will never take him.'

'Why not?'

'He is too old for her.'

'That will not trouble her much,' answered Kainie; 'she calculates the value of everything, and holds a thing to be worth just what money it will bring in. I believe she has no thoughts, no care for anything but money. She knows that Uncle Ki has got land and stock, has a good house and a balance at the bank; she will say "There's profits," and take him—snap at him eagerly.'

'I do not believe you,' said Mark, and laughed. 'But about yourself, not Zita. My mother still objects to my bringing you home to Crumbland and acknowledging you. I do not feel comfortable and happy to be in a good house, and to have you in that hovel at that mill.'

'I cannot go to you so long as your mother is opposed.'

'Perhaps not; but, after all, Kainie, she cannot hold out against you for ever. She loves me too sincerely. She has too right a mind. She will see how it frets me; and then—when all is

said and done—I am master of Crumbland, and not she. If I be driven to assert my will, she will submit. She is certain to like, to love you, when she comes to know you. It is but for a little while waiting. I do not wish to have recourse to strong measures if delay will make all go smooth of itself. You understand that, Kainie?'

'I will wait. I am content at the mill. But —oh, Mark! I must tell you a joke. That Cheap Jack girl was at Red Wings the other day, and she wanted to buy you of me—actually purchase you.'

'At what price was I estimated?'

'At a ream of black-edged notepaper and envelopes to match.'

Mark burst into laughter.

'That is not all,' continued Kainie. 'When I did not prove eager for the paper, she made another bid.'

'And that—?'

'Was a garden syringe to kill green-fly with soapy water.'

Zita heard both laugh merrily.

'I have not done yet,' continued Kainie. 'She finally produced her most splendid offer.'

'And that was—?'

'It was one that almost made me surrender you, Mark. A box of all kinds of scents. And she said'—Kainie could hardly speak for laughing —'I should smell of Jockey Club in chapel—tremenjous—that's her word—tremenjous!'

Zita s anger was flaming hot, waves of boiling blood swept through her veins, swept before her eyes and blinded her.

Gasping for breath, she rushed up the bank, and, reaching them, struck Kainie on the cheek with her open palm before she or Mark knew she was there.

'It is a shame!' exclaimed Zita, sobbing with emotion. 'It is mean to tell of me—to make sport of me!'

Then, turning on Mark, she said, 'And I will tell you what is preparing for you—you who laugh and jeer at the ignorant, silly Cheap Jack girl. It is the gallows or Botany Bay. And'—she snapped her fingers in his face—'if you hang or are transported, I don't care that!'

CHAPTER XXVI.

A NIGHT IN ELY.

THE Isle of Ely, with the city in its midst, and the cathedral in the midst of the city, is more ecclesiastical than Rome itself. Until comparatively recent times the Bishop was a petty prince therein, exercising powers of life and death. He did not indeed sit in the courts himself, and himself sentence to the block and the gallows, any more than did the Pope himself consign offenders to the flames. The secular power was committed to a 'Temporal Steward,' who held his office for life, and discharged the functions of High Sheriff, and the Bishop washed his hands of all blood-guiltiness.

The courts of justice were, however, held in the Bishop's name, and the gaols were institutions under his jurisdiction. The Bishop appointed the municipal authorities and the justices of peace. From the High Sheriff to the town-crier, all derived their authority by commission from the Bishop.

As every acre of land in the isle and far away into the fen belonged to either Bishop or Dean and Chapter, there were no county magnates near, and no country gentry at all. Nay, even in the city itself there was no gentry of independent position. In Rome there are princes who have their territories. In Ely there were not even squires.

Accordingly, the ecclesiastical dignitaries lived very high up in roseate clouds and in an ethereal atmosphere, far above the clay land where grubbed and wriggled the professional men and the shopkeepers.

Perhaps the fact of being so completely under ecclesiastical government paralysed all initiative in Ely, and rendered the inhabitants helpless in cases of emergency. The citizens were but overgrown babies. The lawyer, the surgeon, the M.D., the surveyor, the architect, were accustomed to be swaddled and given suck by the Right Reverend Father the Bishop, or the Very Reverend the Dean, or the Venerable the Archdeacon; and all the officials, the temporal steward, and the justices, and the chief constable, were wont to go in leading-strings.

And they were such good babies. They always thought as the reverend fathers thought; they never cried and kicked; and the air of the Fens must have been salubrious, for they had all ravenous appetites for the fat of the land, which fell from the ecclesiastical tables. At the time

of our tale, co-operative stores had not been so much as thought of. The Bishop, the Dean, and the canons got their groceries, their drugs, their wines, and their stationery from the Ely tradesmen. In return for their custom, these tradesmen professed the strictest churchmanship and the staunchest Toryism.

The system of appointment to offices in Ely was distinctively ecclesiastical. The magistrates were bespectacled and bewigged officials connected by marriage with some of the members of the Chapter. The constables were nominated for their general piety, or because they were burdened with large families. The watchmen were pensioned cripples or asthmatic incapables, whose utmost achievement was to crawl about at night and proclaim the hour. Everything in the city was managed for the residents by a benevolent and beneficent ecclesiastical authority, which exhibited its benevolence and beneficence by conferring offices, not on such as showed efficiency, but on such men as were incompetent to earn a livelihood in any profession or business that demanded the exercise of brain or of muscle.

When the turbulent crew from Littleport arrived in Ely, and the rumour circulated that other Fen centres were sending their contingents of the disaffected to the capital of the Fens, neither magistrates nor constables were prepared to take prompt action to protect the town and

stop the spread of disturbance. Orders were indeed issued to have the minster bell rung, to summon all sober, law-abiding citizens to unite for the common defence, but, although the bell pealed its summons, no one obeyed it, for no one knew where the rallying-point was, or what was to be done by those summoned.

The temporal steward was in bed with a mustard poultice on his chest and a dose of sweet nitre in his stomach. Consequently, when a messenger from the Deanery came to request that he would do something, the wife of the temporal steward was able to point out that he was perspiring freely and the poultice drawing vigorously. To leave his bed and the house was, therefore, out of the question.

There was no deputy sheriff to fill the place which the sheriff was incapacitated from filling. The vacancy had not been filled up, because the Bishop was hesitating, balancing the claims of one who was stone-blind against one who was stone-deaf. The prelate himself was absent on a confirmation tour, and he had taken his chaplains with him, and, what was more to the point, his butler—a man who did most of the thinking in sublunary matters for his master. The constables then in Ely were few. The chief constable, Mr. Edwards, was the manager of Mortlock's bank, and in the interests of the bank he had come to the resolution to keep in the background so as in no way to excite the angry

passions of the mob. Another constable had swallowed a fish-bone, and this was being extracted by a fellow constable. A fourth was at the moment incapacitated for work by one of his constitutional and chronic fits of the hiccups. It was precisely because he suffered from this affliction that the benevolent and beneficent ecclesiastical authority had nominated him to, and invested him with, the office of constable.

As the combined municipal and collegiate forces of watchmen were unprepared or unable to cope with the approaching masses of men, the Dean sent off his coachman on a carriage horse to Bury St. Edmund's, to invoke the aid of the military stationed there. The mob from Littleport entered the town, as already said, preceded by the waggon, in which were placed heavy wash guns loaded with slugs. To announce its arrival a volley was fired, and the slugs rattled on the tiles and broke a few windows.

No sooner had the Littleport body entered Ely, than it learned to its disappointment that nothing had been heard of the Isleham and Swaffham contingents.

In fact, discouragement had dissolved these at the onset. The small landowner, Cutman, who had undertaken to lead the detachment from Isleham, had reconsidered the matter, and resolved that heading a riot could do him no possible good, and might do him very consider-

able harm. The men assembled at the Duck at the appointed hour, waited, and, as he did not appear, became uneasy, supposing that he had been alarmed; they also reconsidered the matter, and, coming to much the same conclusion as Cutman, dispersed quietly to their several homes.

The Swaffham men were also defaulters. The tidings of what was meditated had been communicated to a large farmer there, and when the rabble approached, he met them dauntlessly, along with his stalwart sons and some trusty serving-men, all armed with blunderbusses. He addressed the mob, and, by his bold front and resolute bearing, not only prevented them from attacking his house, but persuaded them to break up and abandon their undertaking.

The Littleport body, swelled by stragglers, and also by men who had lived in the suburbs of Ely, formed a considerable host, and had they been under efficient discipline, and had they known exactly what demands to make, and how to enforce their demands, might have produced serious results.

As it was, they did a certain amount of mischief, and took a certain amount of loot, but all in an aimless manner; and in looting or wrecking forgot the ostensible reasons for their assembly and purpose of marching upon Ely.

No sooner were they in the town than the mob resolved itself, without order given, into

two detachments, whereof one attacked the flour-mills, and the other broke into the victuallers' shops to seize on their stores of ham, bacon, and sausages.

There was a large soak-mill in the lower part of the town, managed by a man named Rickwood. This was the first assailed.

By this time the magistrates, at the advice and exhortation of their wives, had plucked up sufficient courage to venture to parley with the rioters. There were but three or four of these in the place; one was a retired steward who was almost stone-deaf, the other two were clergymen. These magistrates inquired of the fen-men what were their demands, and were answered with confused cries for higher wages, cheaper bread, and for money to be scattered among them.

Terrified by the shouts and the menacing attitude of the mob, they entered into negotiations with them, and offered to raise a certain sum of money from the inhabitants to satisfy their illegal demands. But the rioters could not agree as to the price at which they would desist from violence, nor could they wait with patience till the magistrates had collected the sum offered.

Accordingly, the conference was broken up, and the mob proceeded to smash Rickwood's windows and to beat open his doors.

The miller was not, as it chanced, at home himself, and his wife entered into parley with

the rabble from a window. They demanded fifty pounds, and threatened, unless it were paid, to proceed to set fire to the mill, and the miller's habitation adjoining.

Mrs. Rickwood, in terror, promised the sum, but said that she had not so much coin in the house. She would send her son for the money to the bank.

'No! no! Come yourself!' shouted the men, and proceeded to demolish the windows.

Accordingly, Mrs. Rickwood descended, and in deadly fear issued forth into the street, after having committed the mill to the care of her son.

The banker was also, as already said, chief constable, and in the interest of Messrs. Mortlock was remaining at home, and sitting in his back parlour.

When the mob reached his house, which was one with the bank, loud cries were raised for him, and Mrs. Rickwood knocked at the front door. After long waiting, he appeared in the doorway, as white as chalk. Mrs. Rickwood then entreated him to furnish her with fifty sovereigns in gold, in order that she might purchase immunity for her mill from the insurgent peasantry.

'Nothing in the world will induce me to do this!' exclaimed the chief constable heroically. Whereupon a stone was thrown at him, and struck his head, so that a little blood flowed.

'That is to say,' said Edwards, 'nothing save compulsion;' and he hastened within to find the money.

The second body of rioters in the meantime was engaged in sacking the grocery-shops and provision-stores. One of the magistrates, the Rev. Mr. Metcalf, endeavoured to calm the mob by an assurance that he would induce the owners of the shops to purchase their immunity. But he was successful in two instances only. In some the rabble took the money, and, notwithstanding, plundered the shops. Then a second mill was attacked, but, on ten pounds being produced, no further violence was done to it.

The night was dark. The rioters went round requisitioning faggots and coals, and soon an immense bonfire was kindled before the cathedral west front, and a second in face of St. Mary's church. The first lighted up the splendid pile, bringing out every detail of sculpture, and twinkling in the glass that filled the Norman windows.

Round this fire the young men and girls danced. Some of the men had carried provisions to the Galilee, and prepared for a carouse. The taverns had been attacked very early, and the publicans had been constrained to allow the rioters free use of their liquor.

As Mark had assured Kerenhappuch, Ephraim Beamish had pushed his way after the rabble,

undeterred by the treatment he had received at its hands, his enthusiasm unquenched by his plunge in the icy water. As there was no organisation in the mob, he was suffered to rejoin it with an occasional protest only, but Chevell, Harley, and Tansley would not allow him to remount the waggon.

No sooner did Beamish find that a great body of the insurgents were setting themselves to eat, drink, and revel about the great fire in front of the cathedral, than he got a chair, and endeavoured to harangue them, to point out to them that they were throwing away their occasion, neglecting to enforce their grievances on the employers of labour, and that they were making enemies among all the well-disposed by their capricious and lawless proceedings. But directly his face was discerned by the flicker of the fire, and his voice recognised, beaten back by the cathedral walls, than shouts were raised of, 'That's the fellow who stole the Cheap Jack girl's money. We want no preaching here.'

His chair was tripped up, and he was sent sprawling in the dirt.

He rose angry and disconcerted. The movement of which he was the instigator, and of which he had been appointed director by vote of the men, had rejected his direction, and was taking its own suicidal course.

The fens immediately surrounding the isle on which Ely stood were farmed by men whose

homesteads were on the gault excrescence that formed the isle. According to the preconcerted scheme, the Union of Fen Labourers was to proceed to these farmsteads one by one, to exact of the farmers a contribution to the cause, and an oath to raise the wage.

It was true enough that two or three farms had been visited which lay to right and left of the road from Littleport to Ely, but no sooner had the men reached the Fen capital, than they forgot their purpose, directed their attention to the provision-shops, waylaid and blackmailed passengers, broke into the taverns, and thought only of eating, drinking, and making money. They entirely neglected the scheme that had been agreed to. Not a single farm in the isle was molested, not a single farmer coerced.

CHAPTER XXVII.

SIR BATES DUDLEY'S RIDE.

AFTER a night of revelry, the winter morning broke on men lying tipsy or asleep about the smouldering embers of their fire, against the walls of houses, or crowded on the benches and on the stone floor of the Galilee. Every tavern was packed, and many private houses as well. The rioters had demanded admission, and had threatened violence if opposed. Doors had accordingly been opened to them, and they had received reluctant admission.

On the whole, little serious mischief had been done. A few shops had been invaded, a few well-to-do persons blackmailed, some windows broken, all the ale and spirits in the public-houses drunk out, and all the hams in the licensed victuallers' consumed; but with the sole exception of the cutting open of the head of the chief constable, no personal violence had been done to any one.

The demonstration had been absolutely re-

sultless, so far as concerned the purpose for which it had been organised. The only fruit that would come of it would be that the bakers, millers, and provision-dealers would raise their prices, so as to recoup themselves for what they had lost, and that certain of the rioters would suffer penalties out of all proportion to the injury done.

Some consciousness that a mistake had been made stole over the dull brains of the men as they awoke, chilled and headachy, on the morning after the entry into Ely. Those men who had promoted the movement, but had not been suffered to direct it, were certainly alive to the fact that a great blunder had been made, and that their safety was at stake. And when the rumour spread that the dragoons from Bury were about to arrive, the pot-valiant fen-men rapidly dispersed.

Droves and roads radiating from Ely were thronged with fugitives, flying at their utmost speed towards their homes, and none speeding more rapidly than those men who were guardians of the money collected from the farmers and shopmen and millers for the cause, and who sought not only to secure their persons, but also the money they carried with them, for their own advantage. The sum collected might enable them to escape from the neighbourhood, and it would form a comfortable little capital on which to start business where they were unknown.

When, about noon, the military arrived, the streets of Ely were almost as silent and unoccupied as on any day in the week save market day.

They were met by the magistrates, preceded by Sir Bates Dudley, Bart., an old canon of Ely; the chief constable showed with his head bandaged, and the high sheriff looked approval from his bedroom window, in nightcap and dressing-gown.

Orders were issued for the pursuit of the rioters to Littleport, their headquarters. As it was necessary that a magistrate should accompany them, Sir Bates Dudley was lifted into a saddle. He was a small, very globular man, with a red face and a wig of sandy hair.

'You won't go very fast with me?' inquired the baronet of the officer in charge. 'Be—be—cause, though I was a horseman oo—oo—once, I haven't ridden these forty years.'

Then, turning to his footman, he said, 'Tut—Tut—Thomas, you'll please to run at my s—s—ide, and hold my leg, lest I tut—tut—tumble off. If you see me getting at all out of the per—per—per—pendicular, just run round and give a pull to the other leg.'

Presently Sir Bates Dudley addressed Drownlands, who was standing near him, holding his own horse.

'You will cuc—come too—so important a witness; and you will indicate who are the

persons to be arrested, and who are na—na—named in the warrants I signed. You will oblige me if you will ri—ride at my side, and as Tut—Tut—Thomas is negligent, and his at—at—tention may be distracted, and he may forget his doo—doo—dooty to me, if you see me at all out of the per—per—perpendicular, just give a thrust, will you, with your riding-whip, and set me up—pup—right again. I haven't ridden for forty years. I hope the saddle won't ga—ga—gall the horse.'

'I'll keep at your side, sir,' said Drownlands.

'That wo—wo—won't be quite enough,' said the baronet. 'If you wouldn't mind keeping an eye on my left leg, and if you see it go—go—going up the side of the saddle, just tut—trot round the ba—ba—back and give me a thrust with the end of your whip, and set me per—per—perpendicular again. I can't trust Tut—Tut—Thomas entirely.'

'I'll do what I can for you, sir,' said Drownlands.

Then Sir Bates turned to his man Thomas and said—

'Ki—ki—keep an even habit of mind, Tut—Thomas, and don't let your thoughts ramble to Mary. Don't pup—pup—pull my right leg too hard, nor let it go too lax.'

Then, addressing Drownlands—

'I am shush—shush—sure the Government and all law-abiding citizens owe a debt of gratitude

to you, Mr. Dud—Dud—Drownlands.' The baronet gasped at the name, opening his mouth and jerking his face forward, as though endeavouring to catch a bluebottle and swallow it. 'I con—con—congratulate you on your activity, observation, and spirit. You will be the primary means of convicting the ri—ri—rioters.'

The canon rode along, balancing himself uncertainly in his saddle. The dragoons trotted after.

When, however, the clay land of the Isle of Ely was left, trotting was out of the question. The horses made their way painfully through the slough, and military order was not to be maintained.

Sir Bates's horse tossed his head, and endeavoured to keep up a trot. There is pride in brutes as well as in men, and the baronet's steed was elate at the idea of preceding the splendid dragoon chargers, so well groomed, so gorgeously accoutred, and bearing such radiant beings on their backs. Let the fen cart-horses see that he, Sir Bates Dudley's cob, took precedence of, was on gracious terms with, these war chargers. Every now and then, when a horse was visible in a stubble field, he neighed to him a challenge to observe who went by and in what company.

'I don't quite like this mo—mo—motion,' gasped the canon, who was bouncing like a pea on a drum. 'I am afraid the saddle will terribly ga—ga—gall my horse's back.'

At that moment Drownlands uttered an exclamation, and, turning to the colonel of the dragoons, cried, as he pointed with his whip at a figure in a field separated from the drove by a lane of water—

'There is Ephraim Beamish, a ringleader. A warrant against him is signed. He has the audacity to look on as though this did not concern him.'

The colonel gave orders to two of his soldiers to ride in pursuit. The men detailed for the purpose at once leaped their horses across the dyke. The road bank was sufficiently firm to enable the beasts to spring.

Then they started in pursuit.

'Shoot! Shoot!' cried Drownlands. 'You will never take a prisoner like that.'

The dragoons were careering over the field, one of fifteen to twenty acres, but it was hard work for the horses, so spongy was the soil; and Pip Beamish ran before them without greatly exerting himself.

The dragoons on the drove, at the command of the colonel, drew up in line, and watched the chase.

'They will never catch him,' repeated Drownlands; 'they never can. Give orders that he be shot.'

'I cannot do that,' said the officer in command. 'They will outstrip and head him shortly.'

'They never will. You do not know the Fens.'

In another moment Beamish was seen to plant a long pole he was carrying, swing himself aloft easily and gracefully, and fall lightly on his feet on the farther side of the dyke limiting the field.

One of the dragoon's horses floundered and rolled over in the soft soil, but the other was close behind Beamish. It rose, and in a moment vanished along with its rider in the dyke. The hind feet had found nothing substantial on which to obtain the necessary purchase for a leap across the water, and the beast and rider had fallen into the stagnant, slimy liquid that filled the ditch.

In spite of discipline, oaths and curses broke from the dragoons who were looking on.

'I knew it,' said Drownlands. 'Why did you not shoot? If that horse hasn't broke his back, it is a lucky job. Now Pip Beamish is beyond reach, beyond gunshot, and it will take a day to get the horse dug out.'

'What do you mean?' asked the colonel angrily.

'Mean? Why, that no horse that falls into a dyke can get himself out, or be got out save by spade-work. There he must remain; every struggle makes him sink deeper. There is no bottom to the dykes till you reach the clay, and for that you must go down twenty feet. He will never do it again, if that is any consolation to you. But ten to one his back is broke, and

you may as well send a bullet through his head.'

'Here,' shouted the colonel, 'dismount and go help Standish out.' He beckoned to three men.

'Help him out?' mocked Drownlands. 'They can't do it. They must have workmen that understand the business. They must have the proper tools. You don't happen to have brought any "beckets" with you, I suppose?'

The man who had been precipitated into the water, was now seen on the bank. He had scrambled out by means of the reeds that grew rankly in the ooze. He was stamping, his splendid accoutrements were tarnished, and the foul fen-water was streaming from him. Holding the reins, by coaxing words he endeavoured to encourage his horse to struggle out of the water. The poor brute made efforts to escape, churning up the sludgy mud and peat in the dyke, but was incapable of doing anything to extricate himself. The more he struggled the deeper he sank.

When the situation was thoroughly realised—and the colonel would not for some time believe the assertion of Drownlands that the horse could be extricated by no other means than the formation of an incline by spade labour—then he consented grudgingly to negotiate with some loafers who had followed the troop, and by promises of liberal payment to engage them to undertake the rescue of the charger.

When this was settled,—and it took some time to settle,—the body of soldiers advanced towards Littleport. Tidings had come that the rioters were making a rally there, and intended to contest the way with the military. That they were armed was known, as also that the fowlers of the Fens were crack shots. If they held to their resolution, Littleport would not be occupied without effusion of blood.

It was indeed true that a rally had been made at Littleport. The men living there, fearing that they would be arrested for the part they had taken in the disturbance, spoke of defending themselves—better die with guns in their hands, they said, than swing on the scaffold. But now, as before, there was neither discipline nor cohesion among the men. The colonel knew that they had no leaders, and did not greatly concern himself at the menace. He was impatient to reach Littleport, not lest the rioters should gather force, but to get finished with an unpleasant and inglorious affair. Moreover, at Littleport most of the arrests would have to be made, and it was as well to reach it as speedily as possible, before every rioter had hidden under a bed, or in a rabbit-hole.

In the meantime, a considerable number of persons assembled on the drove, partly to stare at the unprecedented sight of the glittering military parade, but partly also as a means of exhibiting their own peaceful demeanour, and

showing that they had no sympathy with the disturbers of tranquillity. As it happened, some of the men who had been instigators to violence thought this a happy way of throwing a veil over their past proceedings. By putting on a look of sheep-like innocence, and thrusting themselves forward, they hoped to escape. But they had miscalculated. They might have escaped, but for the presence of Drownlands, who had followed the mob, watched its proceedings, had taken note of everything done, and of the doers, and had denounced some forty men to the magistrates, and was now accompanying the military and Sir Bates Dudley, to point out those of whom it was advisable to make an example, and who were already down on his 'information,' and against whom warrants had been issued.

'I think,' said Sir Bates, 'that if I am not absolutely nec—cess—cessary, I would rather return to Ely. The saddle somehow does not fit the horse.'

'We must have a magistrate with us,' said the officer in command of the dragoons.

The canon looked piteously about him, drew out a silk pocket-handkerchief, and wiped his brow.

'It is of the horse I am thinking. A gall is so painful, so very pup—pup—painful to the horse. I will do my dud—dud—duty, however painful it may be to the horse.'

The soldiery trotted on to Littleport. There the rioters had overthrown a waggon across the road, and by means of bundles of straw had composed a rude barricade. The resistance offered by them was feeble and half-hearted. The sight of the dragoons overawed the men, and several, after firing from behind the bundles, slunk away.

The soldiers speedily passed the barricade and dashed among the men who remained. A shot from behind a garden paling broke a dragoon's arm, another brought down one of the chargers. This encouraged the men for a moment, and they sprang at the heads of the horses, whilst others assailed the riders with pitchforks. There ensued a brief hand-to-hand scuffle. But when one of the rioters was shot through the head, and the men saw that the soldiers were determined no longer to trifle with them, they fled in all directions.

Numerous arrests were made, and then the dragoons returned towards Ely, Sir Bates jogging before them, and their captives well guarded in their midst.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

TWO PLEADERS.

THE tidings that the dragoons were on their way to Littleport had hardly spread sufficiently in the forenoon to draw together great quantities of spectators, but after they had gone by it was otherwise. The news flew like wildfire over the Fens, and the inhabitants of the district came in troops and lined the road, so that they might have the satisfaction of seeing the military, and taking account of the number of prisoners they had taken.

The fen-folk are all more or less closely connected by marriage, forming a people to themselves, separate in interests, customs, and character from those who live on the high grounds. They have been wont for generations to seek their mates among themselves, with the result that a close family connection binds the whole population together. The number of cases in the Fens in which a woman, on

marriage, retains her maiden name is quite unequalled elsewhere. Whoever might be taken up by the military was certain to be akin to some of the lookers-on, and therefore the spectacle anticipated on the return of the dragoons was calculated to engage their interest and excite their sympathies.

Among the yeomen there is intermarriage with cousins for the sake of adding acre to acre and barn to barn, but among the labouring population no such inducement prevails. They choose their wives from among their blood relatives, because the idea never crosses their minds to go elsewhere to find mates. They must marry cousins or not marry at all, and the question resolves itself in one of degrees of consanguinity.

As nearly, if not all, the wealthy landowners are grandsons or great-grandsons of half-wild fen-slodgers, it follows that they are knitted by blood ties to the labourers they employ. This does not necessarily increase good fellowship, nor promote forbearance. The purse-proud yeoman is the harshest master. He draws the line of sympathy at the mark of the class to which he belongs, a class of recent creation. He holds fast to his brother yeoman, and both together grind down their brother labourer.

This condition of affairs was of course more noticeable formerly than at present. Each generation separates the well-to-do a step

farther from their poor relations. Our story refers to events and conditions some decades ago.

On account of the tyranny exercised by the masters, little consideration was felt for them by the men when they broke out in revolt, although allied to them by blood; and the stacks that had been fired were in several instances set in flames by the blood relatives of the owners of the stacks.

As the dragoons trotted along the road towards Ely, exclamations and lamentations broke out as the men they had taken were recognised by those who lined the highway.

'There is Robert Cheesewright! Oh dear! what will the old Robert do without him?'

'Be still. They have not taken Robert. He is going as a witness against Pip Beamish. That's why he is there.'

'Well, they have handcuffed James Cammel, anyhow, and he was going to marry my Beulah. If they hang him, Beulah will have to take Aaron Layton instead, that's all.'

'There is Joseph Lavender. He is my wife's son by her first husband. She will take on dreadful, and I shan't have my shirt properly washed, nor my pasty full baked—that's what it means to me.'

'They have taken Flanders Hopkins and Richard Rutter.'

'Yes; and look you there. That's Isaac Har-

ley, as was in the waggon. I wish I had Isaac's gun, I'd shoot the chap that has charge of him. How ever came Isaac to be taken?'

'Ay; and he is cuffed to Joseph Stibbard.'

'Stibbard broke into the parson's house at Littleport, and took his silver spoons and money.'

'He needed them more than did the parson.'

'Of course he did, and had a right to take them. Joseph Stibbard's sister married my nephew, Philip Easy. I hope he handed on the spoons to her before the soldiers took him.'

Such were the comments passed. Some of those looking on endeavoured to push between the soldiers, and get at their relatives who were being conveyed to prison, but were repelled by their guards. Comments of another sort were expressed less loudly, though not less frankly.

'There rides Drownlands. He has been along with the dragoons all the day. He has been pointing out whom they are to take; and if there is hanging to be done, i' fecks! it is he who has twisted the rope for their necks, poor fellows.'

'I knew he was out and about all last night.'

'Yes, and has been all. this morning with the magistrates. But they haven't taken Pip Beamish yet.'

'I am sure they would be put to it for

witnesses, if it were not for Tiger Ki. Which of us would peach? Wouldn't we do the other thing, and swear 'em off?'

'You are right there. I suppose Ki Drownlands knows what he is doing. But I reckon that this will be remembered against him, and he will be paid out for it some day or other.'

'Trust our chaps for that, and the day will not be distant.'

Drownlands observed the sullen looks, the scowls with which he was greeted, and noticed the whispers that passed as he rode by, but treated all with indifference or contempt.

'They do not love me. I scoff at them,' said he to Sir Bates Dudley. 'They have done their worst. We are clearing the Fens of the only lads with any spirit in them to do mischief. Those that remain are arrant cowards.'

Then he turned his horse's head down the drove to Prickwillow. 'I am not needed till to-morrow. Here is my home.'

His eye lighted on Zita, who had come forth to see the soldiers pass with their prisoners. Near her were Mrs. Tunkiss, Sarah, and the farm serving-men.

Zita uttered an exclamation and ran forward, caught Drownlands' horse by the bridle, and exclaimed—

'What is the meaning of this? Why is Mark Runham taken? This is your doing.'

'Why not? He headed the rioters.'

'He did not head them. It is false. You know it is so. Set him at liberty at once.'

'I cannot do that. He has been arrested. He will appear before the magistrates to-morrow.'

'Very well, so will I. I can bear witness as well as you.'

Then Zita darted nimbly between the soldiers, in spite of their protests, which were not roughly enforced, for the quick eyes of the dragoons saw that she was pretty. She made her way to Mark, who was handcuffed.

'Mark,' said she, 'I will help you.'

'You?' he answered. 'You said it was all one to you whether I were hanged or transported. I am innocent, and will be discharged without your help.'

'Back!' ordered the dragoon on the right, and Zita was forced to retreat.

As she did so, she saw Kainie by Drownlands. The girl had seized his bridle, and was gesticulating with vehemence.

'It is your doing,' said Kerenhappuch. 'You hate him. You try to destroy him. You are heaping to yourself wrath against the day of wrath.'

'Let go my bridle,' ordered Drownlands.

'You are my uncle,' insisted the girl, her fair hair blown over her face. With one hand she brushed it back, but did not release her hold on the bridle. 'Although you have not

treated me as of like flesh and blood with yourself, yet you cannot undo it; I am your niece, and speak to you I will, now.'

'Let go, I say. I will hold no communication with you.' He struck his spurs into the sides of his horse, which reared. But Kainie would not let go. The plunging of the horse made the curb nip and cut Kainie's hand, and some blood came over it. She changed hands on the bridle.

'Look!' said she. 'You cannot help it. This is Drownlands blood. It is Drownlands blood appeals to you now.'

Then Zita laid her hand on the bridle, on the farther side of the beast.

'We are two girls,' she said, 'and we will stay you, man though you be. Kainie and I are enemies, we do not love each other, but we unite in beseeching you to do justice to one man.'

'Ay,' said the mill-girl. 'Uncle Ki, you are bent on evil, and we will hold you back against plunging farther into the slough.'

'Mark never intended to injure you,' said the Cheap Jack girl. 'He sought to save your property for you. Why should you work for his destruction?'

'You shall withdraw your charge against him before all the world,' said Kainie.

'You shall break the shackles off his hands yourself,' said Zita.

Drownlands dug his spurs wrathfully into

the flanks of the horse, and clenched his teeth and hands. But though the beast was wounded and bounded, his head was held too firmly for him to break away.

'Shall I grip your foot till you scream,' exclaimed Zita, 'as I did on the night when I stayed you before?'

'Will you kill Mark, as you killed his father?' asked Kainie.

Her words were random words. She spoke in the vehemence of her wrath against Drownlands, and anxiety for Runham. She knew nothing definite against her uncle, but she had heard the whispered gossip of the Fens.

'I will have justice on all who have wronged me,' muttered Drownlands.

'Take care!' exclaimed Kainie, raising the disengaged hand, down which ran a trickle of blood. 'Do not think that because some of the poor lads have been taken, because ten out of one hundred are handcuffed, that every heart that is full of bitterness is beating behind prison walls, and every hand that can be raised against you is fettered. There are ninety pairs for every ten you put in iron cuffs, and they will be clenched in rage and resolve of revenge the day that you send the poor fellows to the gallows.'

'I fear them not,' said Drownlands scornfully.

'You may not fear, but that is because, like Pharaoh, your heart is hardened and your eyes

are blinded, and the Lord is driving you to your destruction. I am here to stand between you—I, as your niece—between you and what threatens.'

'What threatens?'

'You are threatened.'

'Who threatens me?'

'Pip Beamish for one.'

'Ha! he will be arrested speedily.'

No, not speedily. He is not taken yet, and till he is taken you are not safe.'

'I will see that he be not at large for long. Before this week is out he will be in prison.'

'That may be a few days too many for you.'

'I fear not your Pip Beamish; your braggarts do nothing.'

'No, braggarts do nothing; but Pip is no braggart.'

'It is my turn now,' said Zita. 'You, Kainie, have tried and have failed. Leave him to me. I can employ reasons that are stronger than yours. Let go your hold of the horse's head. You have said your say. Now I will say mine. But none must hear us.'

Kainie reluctantly released the bit. Then Zita, still with her hand on the bridle, strode in the direction of Prickwillow, leading the horse, and some of the people congregated on the drove looked after her and the master, and laughed.

'He has found his mistress,' said one man, nudging his fellow.

'Ay, and is following her lead like a lamb,' replied the man who had been nudged.

'Who leads to-day will drive to-morrow,' said a third.

'Is he going to marry her?' asked the first.

The man addressed shrugged his shoulders and said, 'No money. Drownlands is not such a fool as that.'

None of this was heard by Zita, who did not relax her hold, nor turn to look at those who were left in the road. The master suffered her to conduct him towards the house without making remonstrance.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A DEAL.

WHEN Zita was beyond earshot, she looked over her shoulder, and said to Drownlands, 'I call that mean.'

She walked on, then halted, changed her hand on the bridle, and, gazing about, said, 'You could free yourself of him in no other fashion, so you swear his life away. But you have to reckon with me before it comes to that. I will go into court and swear against you. What I shall swear to will be the truth; your oath will bind you to lies.'

'I refuse to strive with you in words,' retorted Drownlands. 'A woman is always victor with such weapons.'

'What? you prefer flails?—those are your weapons,' exclaimed Zita, clenching her fist and holding her arm extended before her. 'I know well why you are set against Mark Runham. You think that he is something in some way to me, and that I am much to him. It is because

of this that you pursue him. It is because of me that you twist the rope round his throat. But you are wrong altogether. I will not say that Mark is nothing to me. He was kind to me once; kind when my heart was tender, because my father was just buried. But I am nothing to Mark. He mocks at me. He sneers and laughs at the Cheap Jack girl. He does not love me; and, moreover, he is bound to another.'

'Mark bound to another? Who is that?'

'Nay, it is his affair, and he has not given me leave to tell his secrets. But you may guess.'

Drownlands' face testified his surprise.

'I cannot guess,' he said, after a long pause.

'Well,' said Zita, 'father's word was true, that in such matters men are blind. We girls see—and I ought to see, for Mark has not played me fair. He did let me think he fancied me; but I think so no more. He has made me angry with him, and I am angry with him still. But there is a step beyond which I will not go. If I could punish him I would—but not with the rope or Botany Bay. You know that he came into your house in a friendly mind, and with kind intent. You know that he was not in league with that topsy-turvy general public. I shall hate and despise you, as I thought I could hate and despise no man, if you swear falsely against him.'

'He has stood between us,' said Drownlands.

'He has not done so,' retorted Zita. 'Your own deeds lie between us, not Mark Runham. The events of that night lie between us as a wall of ice reaching up to heaven, that can neither be climbed nor undermined. Listen to me, master. I hate to be mean; but if you drive me to desperation, if I see no other way to save Mark's life, I will do even that which is mean.'

'What is that? I do not understand.'

'I have no wish to do it. I shall hate myself if I do it. You were good to my poor father, and to me. When all was dark and cold about me, you opened to me your house and fireside. You have harboured me, my horse, and the van. I would not speak a word to mortal man of what I know. They might tear the flesh off my bones with fiery pincers, and my mouth would remain shut. I owe you an infinite debt of gratitude, and I would repay it. But there is one thing I cannot do—I cannot suffer you to send Mark to the gallows. Rather than do that, I will speak, and tell the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, about the two flails.'

Drownlands was silent. His face had changed to a clay colour, and his lips were tightly drawn on his teeth.

'And if it be any comfort to you to know this,' pursued Zita, as she opened the hand extended before her: 'if you will drop this charge against Mark, retract every word you

have said in his disfavour, I will swear to you to have nothing more to do with Mark all your days upon earth. He shall be to me no other than a stranger. I will stop my ears against him if he should try to speak to me flattering words. I will turn my head away if the fancy takes him to look at me with kindly eyes. There, Ki Drownlands, I have made you an offer now. I threw a menace at you just now.'

She had stayed the horse. She stood in the midst of the drove, upright, her foot planted before her, her head raised, one arm lifted to the horse's head, the other extended before her with hand outspread. She had nothing on her head save her chestnut hair flying in the cold north wind. Her side-turned face was colourless and sallow.

'Come, Ki Drownlands. When I make an offer, I mean it. When I make a threat, I mean that too. Will you take my offer? It is not Cheap Jack Zita who will go back from her word.'

'Be it so, then.'

'It is a deal?'

'Yes—a bargain.'

'Here is my hand,' said Zita, dropping the bridle. 'A deal is a deal.'

CHAPTER XXX.

IN COURT.

A FEW days were allowed to pass to obtain fresh captures. On a keen, frosty morning, those taken by the constable and the military, to the number of nearly forty persons, were brought before the magistrates for the preliminary examination. It had been resolved that a Special Commission should be appointed to try the prisoners on the capital charges of burglary, arson, robbery, and tumultuous assembling to the disturbance of the peace, and the commission of acts of violence. The object of the magistrates on the present occasion was to sift the cases, and deal at once with those of a light nature, and remand such as were serious.

The magistrates were in force at the court-house, and proceedings had begun before Ki Drownlands arrived in a light gig, with Zita at his side.

On reaching the court, the girl was surprised

to see a constable issue from the door, and in loud tones call the name of Ephraim Beamish.

'Well,' said she, 'those magistrates must be a set of innocents if they order Pip to be summoned in the streets of Ely. Do they suppose he would come here to be caught? Pip will put his distance between himself and the magistrates, as he did t'other day when the dragoons were on the drove. He did not stay for them then, and he won't come for the calling now.'

On entering the court Zita looked about her. She was affected with a qualm of nervousness, and her colour was heightened. She had never been in a court of justice before; but when she discovered that the hall was crowded, she held up her head, breathed freely, and her spirits recovered their elasticity.

'It's my own general public again,' said she; 'I am not afraid any more.'

'Ephraim Beamish makes no answer to his name,' said the clerk of the court.

'We will proceed with the case against Ephraim Beamish,' said the chairman; 'and the Bench hopes that the constables will not be remiss in their duty, nor relax their efforts to obtain possession of his body, and lodge him in prison—that is, should his case be proved.'

The evidence produced did satisfy the Bench that Beamish should be remitted to the hands of the Special Commission.

Then Mark Runham was called, and at once placed in the dock.

Zita looked at him. She could see that he was not altogether confident that his innocence would be acknowledged. He strove to disguise his anxiety, but ineffectually. He was bewildered at the charge laid against him, and troubled at finding himself in a novel and unpleasant situation.

The depositions having been read over, Hezekiah Drownlands, of Prickwillow, was ordered to stand in the witness-box, for it was he who had lodged information against Mark.

Zita immediately elbowed her way to the front, and, resting her elbow on the rail that limited the portion of the court accessible to the public, looked steadily into the face of the master. She was resolved to check and correct his statements, so that they should not tell unfavourably against the prisoner. Drownlands noticed her, but refrained from meeting her eye. He gave his evidence with hesitation and confusedly, for he had laid information against Mark Runham, and was now seeking to minimise the charge and weaken the force of his own accusations.

'I was in my office,' said Drownlands, 'on that same evening, and was talking with—with Zita there,'—he pointed with his thumb towards the girl, but without looking at her,—'when I heard the voices of the rioters.'

'Stay a moment,' said the chairman, interposing. 'Who may this Zita be?'

The chairman was a merry, red-faced man, a gentleman who had been brother to a former Dean, and had obtained from that Dean a lease of a large tract of ecclesiastical property for ninety-nine years at a nominal rent, and who resided and had become wealthy in Ely.

'I refer,' said Drownlands, 'to that young woman. She lives in my house.'

The eyes of the Bench and of the audience were directed towards the girl.

'Oh!' said the chairman. 'Rather young for a housekeeper, eh?'

'She is not my housekeeper.'

'In what capacity, then, may we regard her as residing with you?'

Drownlands hesitated.

'Come, come! Don't be reticent, Mr. Drownlands.'

'I really cannot say.'

'Shall we say she is a sort of—ahem—companion?'

A titter ran through the court.

'I am a lodger,' said Zita. 'I pay my way.'

'Silence!' ordered the chief constable.

'You shall speak in your turn,' said the chairman, 'and no doubt you will be able to give us valuable evidence, but you must not interrupt, you understand.' Then, turning to the witness, and chuckling and becoming purple with his

suppressed laughter, the chairman said, 'Very well, Mr. Drownlands, go on. We commend your taste. You were talking with your pretty companion, or lodger.'

A laugh ran through the court, in which all joined save the clerical members of the bench, who looked grave and shook their heads.

Zita coloured, and looked about her angrily. Mark's face was pale, and his eyes were lowered.

'I was talking with her in my office,' continued Drownlands, 'when the mob entered my stackyard with torches, and threatened to burn my ricks and break into my house. Mark Runham was with them.'

'Did he threaten you?'

'A great many voices were raised. I could not distinguish one from another. There was a waggon, and Aaron Chevell, Harry Tansley, and Isaac Harley were in it, and Tansley held a gun.'

'Never mind about Tansley now. I see in your deposition that Mark Runham entered your house. Was it so?'

'Yes. He came to my door and knocked. Then Zita let him in.'

'But,' interrupted the chairman, 'what you say now, witness, is not in agreement with your information. You deposed that he had feloniously entered your house.'

'He came to ask for money.'

'Yes, that may be; but if he knocked and was

'He took ten pounds also from Zita.'

'No; I offered them to him to save my van!' exclaimed the girl.

'Another word of interruption, and you are turned out of court,' said the chairman. 'Constable, stand by her, and if she opens her mouth again, clap your hand over it, or stuff your pocket-handkerchief down her throat.'

'I will do so, your worship.'

'That is all you have to say, witness?'

'Yes. I have nothing more, except that Runham gave cake and ale to the rioters.'

'You saw him do so?'

'No. I heard he had regaled them.'

That is no evidence.' Then the chairman turned to Mark Runham and said, 'Has the accused any questions he would like to put to witness?'

'Yes,' said Mark. 'I inquire of him whether I did not protest that I came merely as a neighbour and a friend.'

'A friend?' exclaimed Drownlands. 'No Runham can be a friend to me, nor I a friend to him.'

'That is no answer to his question,' said the chairman.

'He said something of the sort,' Drownlands admitted.

'Did I not say,' pursued Mark, 'that Gaultrip had refused at the outset to pay blackmail, and that in the end, when his rick was blazing, he

gave way, and that I had run on ahead to advise you as a neighbour not to provoke to outrage an irritated and unreasonable rabble?'

'Yes, you said that; but how was I to know you were not acting for the rioters? You gave them cake.'

'Come,' said the magistrate occupying the chair, 'we will hear now what that lively young woman has to say. She clearly is bursting with desire to tell us all she knows. Put her in the witness-box.'

As Drownlands left the place he had occupied, Zita stepped into his room at the instigation of the constable. She looked up at the Bench with a cheery countenance, and then round at the public that crammed every available space.

'Your name?'

'Zita.'

'Yes, that is well enough as far as it goes, but we want your surname also.'

'Father said we were Greenways. But nobody never called him nothing but "Cheap Jack."'

'And your profession or calling? A companion?'

The court tittered. A clown in the public portion of the hall guffawed.

Zita raised herself erect and said, 'A Cheap Jack.'

'A Cheap Jill, I should say,' observed the red-faced chairman, laughing at his own feeble joke, whereupon the Bench smiled, the clerk of the

court and the constables laughed, and the public roared.

The magistrate went on, 'If you are a Cheap Jack or Jill, how come you to be at Mr. Drownlands' house? Is your father with you?'

'My father is dead,' replied Zita. 'That is just why I am at Prickwillow.'

'Then I presume you are a roving Jill in quest of a Jack?'

'It is the place of the Jacks to run after the Jills,' said Zita; 'not that I want one, thank you.'

'Hush! Hush! No impertinence to the Bench.'

'Beg pardon, I thought the impertinence came from the Bench to me.'

The sally produced some merriment. When it was subdued, the magistrate in the chair assumed a grave manner, and inquired in a different tone—

'So you are staying at Mr. Drownlands' house? In what capacity?'

'I am a Cheap Jack,' said Zita. 'I have my van there, and horse, and all my goods. We got stuck in the mud of the droves, when on our way to Littleport, the night of Tawdry Fair. Father was took ill and died. So I am lodging at Prickwillow, and I pay for my lodging in blacking-brushes and slop-pails.'

'You are not, then, in any menial capacity—not receiving wages?'

'I am a Cheap Jack, laid by the heels through mud and frost,' answered Zita. 'It is true I have sewn on some buttons for Master Drownlands, and have hemmed the linen, and he gives me house-room for my van and me and the horse, till the dry weather comes and we can move away.'

'Well, enough of that. Tell us what you know about the events of the sixteenth.'

'First of aw—aw—all,' interposed Sir Bates Dudley, who sat on the right of the chairman. 'She has been put on her oath. Had we not bet—tet—tet—er ascertain if she is aware of the nature of an oath?'

'Ah, to be sure! I suppose you were brought up as a Cheap Jack?'

'Always—since I was a baby.'

'And not in the most virtuous and godly manner, I fear?'

'I beg pardon, sir?'

Here the constable interposed. He stooped and said in Zita's ear, 'Address the Bench as "your worships."'

'I beg pardon, your worships. My father brought me up. There was not a better man anywhere.'

'Then—do you understand the nature of an oath?'

'Father didn't swear but very little—off an' on like—and mostly at Jewel, who was sometimes very provoking. But nothing like the

man with the merry-go-round—he swore awful.'

'I do not mean that. Do you comprehend that you have solemnly promised to speak the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, and that you have called Heaven to witness that it is so?'

'Yes,' said Zita, with a sigh; 'but it is hard—tremenjous.'

'What?—hard to speak the truth?'

'Yes, your worship—because of the general public. You never was a Cheap Jack, was you, your worship?'

'No. Oh dear no, never—never!'

'I thought so. I never saw you at any of the fairs, but there was a man who swallowed knives like that gentleman at your side.'

'Never mind about that.'

'I was going to say, sir, that as you never was a Cheap Jack, you can't understand what the feelings of one is, when she sees the general public afore her eyes. There comes a sort of swelling of the heart, and a desire of the mind to launch out into wonderful tales, and a longing to make the General Jackass believe that black is white, and chalk is cheese, that what is broken is sound, and what is old is new. But I will do my best. I'll shut my eyes and try to forget the general public, and fancy I'm with father in the van, for then I always said straight out what was true.'

The winter sun streamed in at the south window over against Zita and flooded her as she stood in the witness-box. She had a scarlet and yellow flowered kerchief round her neck and over her shoulders, the white chip bonnet with black ribbons hardly contained her luxuriant, shining hair. The sun blazed in her face, flushing her ripe cheeks, making very June cherries of her lips, and adding a solar twinkle to the sparkle of intelligence and wit indwelling in her honest but roguish eyes. She stood as upright as a wand, her hands resting on the rail before her, and her head thrown back.

The chairman bent to Sir Bates Dudley and whispered—

'What a good-looking wench it is!'

'Is she, indeed?' said the canon. 'You don't mean to say so.'

It did not comport with ecclesiastical, certainly not with canonical, decorum and dignity to know whether a girl were good-looking or not.

The chairman turned to the magistrate on his left and made the same remark. This magistrate was a layman, a retired admiral, who had come to live in Ely because his daughter was married to an official there. His name was Abbott. There was no etiquette in Her Majesty's Navy against observing good looks. He replied, 'Thunderingly so, Christian.'

Christian was the chairman's name.

'I'll speak the truth,' said Zita; 'though it

is against nature—just as it was against nature for that little fat gentleman to ride yesterday; but he did it, because he ought.'

A roar of laughter at the expense of Sir Bates Dudley.

'Go on,' said the chairman, hardly controlling himself—the lay members of the Bench loved to have a joke at the expense of the clerical members. 'Tell your story, and tell it truthfully, or you'll get yourself into difficulties.'

'I mean to,' said Zita.

Then she gave the narrative of the events of the evening of the riot in their order, with such lucidity and simplicity, and so frankly, that the truth of her story was stamped on every sentence. Now and then some odd remark, some allusion to her van or goods, or to the horse, provoked a laugh, and she kept Bench and public in good humour.

'I really think,' said Mr. Christian, 'that we may dismiss the case against young Runham. If my brother magistrates agree with me'— He looked round and met with nods of approval. 'The charge against Mark Runham seems to be a mistake. There is actually nothing in it, and the Bench sincerely regrets that, through a misunderstanding, and possibly through an excess of zeal on the part of Mr. Drownlands, you, Mark Runham, should have been placed in the position you have. Constable, discharge him.'

'Thank you, gents,' said Zita. 'You've done

right, and I'm glad of it. As I came here, I heard that you had given orders for Pip to be called. I did think you then a set of ninnies—but now'—

'That will do. You can leave the witness-box.'

'No, sir—your worship, not yet. I have not quite said all I want to say. I am very much obliged that you have listened to reason and have let Mark go. And, your worships, there are six of you on the bench. I have got just six toasting-forks in stock — the beautifullest toasting-forks that ever you saw. They have red japanned handles and brass mounts, and fold up small, like telescopes, into the handle. And if your worships will do me the favour of coming to Prickwillow, I'll furnish every one of you with a toasting-fork.'

'That will do; leave the witness-box.'

'And, your worships, if you will pass over poor Pip Beamish,—he's not right in his head, —I'll let you have a real epergne to raffle for between you.'

'Constable, remove that girl. Turn her out of the court,' ordered the chairman, red with laughter.

'I pity the man she chooses as her husband,' said Christian behind his hand to Abbott, when his order was being carried out.

'Or Drownlands, whose companion she is,' whispered the admiral.

'No—hang it!' said Mr. Christian. 'No more of that. I am sure that girl is as straight as a whistle. You cannot look in her honest face and hear her cheery voice and not swear she is as good and clean as gold. 'Pon my life, Abbott, I have a mind to go for my toasting-fork. What say you? You are an old acquaintance, as you heard,—swallowed knives at the fair,—will you go?'

CHAPTER XXXI.

PISGAH.

ZITA was standing in the room Drownlands called his office, in conversation with the master.

'What did you mean by that which you said to the magistrates—that you were tied here by frost, held by mud, and that when frost went and mud dried you would be free to go?'

'It is so.'

'You will leave me?'

'I would go as soon as the van could roll along the drove,' replied Zita, 'but that there are other difficulties than frost and mud, and how to get out of these I do not as yet see. I work at them in my head, but cannot find a way of escape.' She considered a while, with her hands folded and her eyes on the floor. 'You see, there is the stock. It seems sinful to let it lie idle—if it don't breed money, it will breed moths and rust. Father always said money was made to jump—just the same as frogs were so

created. Here is all this store of goods doing nothing. Here is myself—born a Cheap Jack, and a Cheap Jack to my fingers' ends. I am not in my right place if not going about in my van to fairs and markets, selling my goods, and making the money jump, as it was ordained to.' Zita pursed her lips. 'That is on one side. On the other there are considerations also. In the first place, it is awkward for a young girl to be cheap-jacking over the country—it's awkward, and it's not respectable. She cannot manage by herself. As the gentleman said, a Jill must have a Jack. That was true, though I did not like to hear him say it. I could not manage the van and Jewel and the selling alone. I must have some man with me. And if I were to take a servant, he might set his head to make himself Jack and make me Jill. And to take a proper Jack,' pursued Zita,—'I mean, to have a husband,—why, I don't fancy it. I don't like the notion of it at all. There is my great difficulty.'

'Then stay at Prickwillow.'

'I don't know. If I were here, you would not leave me in peace and quietness. I do not desire to remain here, but I do not know where else to go. Now, you see, I am in a cleft stick.'

'Take me, and remain.'

'That, I have told you, can never be. If you ask that again, I will go. If you say nought

about it, I will make shift to stay till something turns up.'

'Till you find a Jack?'

'I do not want a Jack. I said so. I want to remain free—Jack and Jill all in one.' Her expression suddenly changed as she asked, 'Have they taken Pip Beamish yet?'

'No; he has been seen, but he eluded capture. He is in the Fens. He has some hiding-place, but where it is we have not yet discovered. The constables are out and watching. He cannot leave the Fens.'

'Cannot? He escaped the dragoons. He has escaped the constables, as you tell me now.'

'Ah! the dragoons were not accustomed to fen ways. The constables will take him. They will form a ring and close in. There is a reward for whoever takes him, and I have added five guineas.'

'And I will give ten to any constable who lets him slip through his fingers. Publish that.'

'We have had enough of Ephraim Beamish,' said the master. 'We were speaking about ourselves. You have your difficulties and troubles, but I also have mine.'

Drownlands seated himself at the table, placed his arms on the board, and for a moment rested his head on his folded arms. Then he looked up and said—

'I have my distresses, but they are of other

nature to yours, and different in degree. Do you know Scripture? Did your father ever read the Bible to you?'

'My father was a God-fearing man,' answered Zita, with warmth and pride. 'He made me learn passages by heart, and there was one tale he read over every Sunday, and never tired of it. It was how the Israelites borrowed of the Egyptians jewels of silver and gold, and spoiled the Egyptians, then went off and got the Egyptians drowned, and so were able to keep their borrowings. Father said there was the making of Cheap Jacks in them Israelites.'

'Did you ever read of Moses, how he went up the mountain to view the Promised Land,—the land flowing with milk and honey,—and he looked on it from afar, but was never allowed to set foot thereon? And he died there, in the mount. The wind came to him sweet with thyme, and he saw the green cattle pastures by the waters of comfort, but he might not drink of its milk or eat its honey. And he died there, looking at the land that was so near and yet so far, a land he might see, but never set foot on. He died there, for it broke his heart.'

Drownlands laid his head again on his folded arms. Zita remained in the same position. She had an inkling of his drift, and was uneasy, and cast about for some means of relief from a painful scene.

'I suppose,' she said, 'there were fine bargains

to be driven in the Promised Land, and that the Canaanites were as soft-headed as the Egyptians. To a man of proper feeling it was vexing.'

Drownlands paid no attention to the remark. He continued—

'Do you remember why Moses was not suffered to go in and possess the Good Land? There was something betwixt him and it. He had done that which was against the law, therefore the Lord showed him the fields of Canaan, but said he must never lay his head in the dewy grass, never smell its upturned earth, never touch its fair flowers.'

'Yes, I remember something about it,' said Zita.

'What killed Moses was the seeing the land, and being told it never might be his,' continued Drownlands. 'But he could not go back from Pisgah into the wilderness. He could not turn his back on Canaan. He must sit among the rocks, and look on the pleasant land, till his heart broke, and he died.'

The girl fixed her eyes on the quivering face of Drownlands. She saw that he was in terrible earnest, and she did not see her way out of an embarrassing situation. He spoke again.

'Zita, do you think it would have been wise for Joshua to have come up into Pisgah when Moses was there? Would not Moses have sprung up and cried out, "This man will enter on what is denied me!" and have held him by

the throat?' Drownlands was now on his feet, his hands extended before him, suiting his action to his words. 'He would have held him by the throat, have thrown him on a rock, put his knee to his chest, and bent his back so—and have broken his back.'

As he spoke, he hit and split and crushed down half the table. Then he drew a long inhalation, reseated himself, wiped his brow, and said—

'There is no Joshua. You swore to me there was none.'

'I think I can comprehend this roundabout talk,' said Zita. 'But if you mean that I am your Promised Land, you are mistaken. I never was promised to you.'

'No, that is true; you are the Loved Land, the Desired Land. No, you never were promised.'

'And it is quite certain that I am not for you.'

'I know it.'

'And I will trouble you to keep your Pisgah at a distance, and stick to it,' said Zita.

'You have told me that you never can be mine, and you have told me also why. My sin stands between us, as a sin stood between Moses and Canaan. And yet—I would do it again if I met him. You do not know how Runham wronged me; you have never learned what was my provocation. I pay the penalty

of my sin, as did Moses. That very night I killed him — that very same night, not two minutes after the last bubbles came from his lips—I first saw you. The punishment followed on the crime faster than the thunder-clap after the lightning-flash. Well, then, so long as you remain before my eyes, that I can see your golden hair, and hear your lark-like voice, I am content. I have all I can expect. I will try to be content. But I could not endure to have a Joshua near me.'

'There is none—if you mean a Jack.'

'I trust your word. Mark Runham is nothing to you?'

'I am nothing to Mark,' said Zita, with slight evasion. 'He would not even look at me in court.'

'So long as you remain here, I will bear my burden, though it break my heart, bit by bit. But that is better than to lose you altogether. No'—he stood up again, went to the window, leaned his arm and head against the shattered casement, and let the wind blow in on him through the broken glass—'no, that I can bear —to have you here. But to lose you—to see you no more—I cannot even endure to think of that.'

Zita made a movement to escape. He heard her, and, without turning his head, made a sign to her with his hand to stay.

'Do not leave me. I have still something I

must say. I want to strike a bargain with you.'

'A deal? I am ready.'

Zita resumed her place. Drownlands came slowly back to the table.

'Listen to me,' he said, with a thrill in his deep tones. 'I have made up my mind to this —that *his* blood lies between me and you, as a Dead Sea I may never cross. I must sit on my Pisgah and look at you as unapproachable. That is all I can hope for; that is all I demand; and in order to secure this, I am ready to make you an offer. I shall never marry—never. All the land round Prickwillow is mine, and I have money in the bank—many thousands of pounds. You know what money is worth. You can judge what this land brings in every year to heap the pile. It shall all be yours if you will stay with me till I die. I ask for nothing else but to have you here in this house, that I may hear you laugh, that I may see your smiling face. That is all. I will not open my mouth to ask for anything but that—just to see you and hear you every day; now and then to touch your hand; happy, if as you pass me your skirts brush me; glad for a day if you condescend to cast a word at me. That is all—the full, the sum of all. And for that I will pay away everything I have. Command me. Do with me what you please, only do not banish me. My money is at your disposal, and when

I die everything that I have becomes yours. See here.' He went to his desk, unlocked it, and drew forth a paper. 'I have made my will, but it is not yet signed and attested. It could not be so till we had come to an arrangement together. If you will undertake to remain with me on the terms I propose, then you will be a wealthy woman some day when I am gone. And whilst I am here cumbering the place,'—his tone was bitter,—'you have but to ask and I will give you what you require. Agree with me, and this document shall be signed and attested forthwith. For a very slight concession on your part you will receive a rich repayment. As you said, you could not go about the country in your van, and you have no settled home to which you can go. Surely you will concede this to me.'

He placed the paper on the table before Zita.

She took up the will and read it through.

In few words, and to the point, Drownlands had constituted her sole heir and legatee to everything he possessed, on the one condition that she remained in his house through the rest of his life.

She put the paper down on the table again, without, however, releasing it from her hand, and stood considering.

'There is one thing,' she said, after a long pause, 'one thing I must stick out for whether I stay here for a short time or for long.'

'What is that?'

'That you board up the shed where my van is kept, so that the fowls may not roost on it.'

Then in at the door came Mrs. Tunkiss.

'There's Mark Runham come,' she said to the master, after looking suspiciously first at Zita, then at him. 'And he says he must speak with you on business.'

'Mark?—Mark again? Bring him here. I am not afraid of him now. Come, Zita, what say you to my offer?'

For a few moments she remained with her hand to her head, breathing hard, her eyes dim.

'Come, Zita—what answer?'

She looked at him with glazed eyes. She was in pain and sorrow. She would in one moment see Mark,—Mark, whom she loved,—and see him with the knowledge that she never could be his. But the demand made of her to surrender was not so great as it might have been had Mark loved and respected her. He liked, or had once liked her. Now he loved another. He despised her for some reason she could not understand. He held by Kainie, to whom he was bound by promise, and to whom, after a short wavering of his affections, he had returned.

'Come, Zita, what say you to my offer?'

In a whisper, with sunk head, her chin in her bosom, and with folded hands—

'I accept.'

CHAPTER XXXII.

A PARTHIAN SHOT.

'SHALL I go?' asked Zita.

'No, stay. There can nothing pass betwixt us but what you may hear. And now that he is come, he shall witness the signature to the will.'

'I would rather leave.'

Further discussion of this point was prevented by the entrance of Mark.

The young man noticed that Zita was in the room, but he did not look at her or address her. He directed his eyes steadily at Drownlands, who remained seated at the table.

'I have come on business,' said Mark.

'Say what it is.'

Mark demurred. 'Let us speak together in private.'

'No; what has to be said may be said before her.'

'If you wish it. I have come concerning Kainie.'

'What about Kainie?'

'She is your niece.'

'To my sorrow.'

'You should not say that. She is a good girl. Not to your sorrow, but to your shame.'

Drownlands stamped.

'Spare me words. My patience will not stretch far.'

'Kainie is your sister's only child. She is your nearest relative. I have come to you in her interest. It is no longer possible for her to remain at Red Wings.'

'Why not?'

'It is not seemly. It is not just. The Fens are in commotion; wild men are about, lawless deeds are being done. She is but a girl, and is unprotected, and away from help, if she needed it.'

'She has her dog.'

'That is not sufficient. Dogs have been silenced before now. Consider to what dangers a girl is exposed in such a solitary spot.'

'Pshaw! the men are cowed.'

'Several are about in hiding, and are not yet captured. You do a great wrong to Kainie.'

'I do her no wrong. I leave her alone.'

'That in itself is a grievous wrong. Whose duty is it to guard her, but yours? She bears your name.'

'To my disgrace!' exclaimed Drownlands, glaring up with wrath. 'No more of that.'

'Well, it is no pleasant topic.'

'Did Kainie send you to me?'

'No; I came because I felt concerned for her, and convinced that she must not be allowed—no, not for another night—to remain under the sails of Red Wings. Will you receive her at Prickwillow?'

'Not I.'

'She must be removed from the mill. If you will not take charge of her, then I must.'

'You are welcome. I will have nothing to do with her.'

'Well, then, so be it. It is your duty to see to her security. You refuse to do your duty, so I shall take her. That is settled. Now, one thing further. Will you make Kainie an allowance,—something to support her,—even if you refuse her shelter?'

'Not a penny. I washed my hands of her mother, and I wash my hands of her.'

'I feared this would be your answer,' said Mark, and drew a long breath. 'I feared my application to you would be in vain. Nevertheless, I considered myself bound to make it; I could not act till you had refused to act; much as did Boaz when troubled concerning Ruth. You finally refuse to give protection to Kainie in her loneliness, and at this season of danger?'

'Ay, I do.'

'And refuse to furnish her with even a pittance out of your abundance?'

'Ay, I do.'

'You should blush to deny her what she needs.'

'I blush for her being in the world at all.'

Mark turned to go. Then Drownlands spoke out in strong tones—

'Stay! Now that you are here, I ask you to do me a favour. It is not much—merely to witness a document, to attest my signature to my will. I desire you to see me sign that, and it will be the best answer I can make to your application on behalf of Kainie. Zita, call up Leehanna Tunkiss.'

Mrs. Tunkiss was behind the door. She had been listening in the passage, and now appeared in the doorway, after a short scuffle of feet, to give a semblance of her having come from a distance.

'Do you want me, master?' she asked. 'I was in the midst of baking.'

'Stand there,' ordered Drownlands. Then, rising to his feet, he held up the will and said, 'I have been making my last testament, and I desire that you, Mark Runham, and you, Leehanna Tunkiss, should see me sign it. But that will not suffice. I wish you to know its contents, and then there can be no question relative to its genuineness; and, above all, no delusions, no hopes, no schemes can be based on relationship, fancied or real, that are doomed to disappointment.'

Drownlands looked round him. He saw a flicker in Leehanna's eye. She was akin to him distantly, yet really.

'Zita and I have come to an understanding together,' said the yeoman, in articulate words spoken slowly. 'Zita has promised that she will remain with me, and will look after my house, rule over my servants, attend to my comforts as long as I live. If you, Leehanna, choose to remain with this understanding'—

'I shall do no such thing,' said the housekeeper, tossing her head. 'I thought matters would come to this very quickly. I knew what the minx was aiming at.'

'That is your affair,' said the master. 'Zita stays here, and her word is to be law in my house. I have made my will, and leave to her everything I possess—every brick of my house, every clod of my soil, every guinea of my hoard.' He paused, and looked from one to another. Mark and Leehanna remained mute with astonishment. 'Now go, Mark Runham, as soon as you have attested my signature, and tell Kainie she has nothing to expect from me at present, nor in times to come—nothing from Drownlands living, or Drownlands dead. Let this be known throughout the Fens. Mark Runham, stand here and witness me sign my name. This is my true act and deed.'

'I will not do this,' said the young man, turning white. 'Get some one else to see this

done—this that stamps her infamy and your baseness.' He turned sharply about and went through the door. Then he halted for a moment, hesitated, holding the jamb with one hand, and, looking back with a face devoid of colour, said, 'To-night I shall fetch Kainie away, and she shall find her home with me.'

'Mark!' exclaimed Zita, running to him.

'Stand back!' said he roughly. 'Do not come near me; you, who sell yourself body and soul for what you call profits.'

Then he turned and staggered down the stairs.

'And I give notice that I leave this house at once,' said Mrs. Tunkiss. 'Fine goings on these be. I have ever kept myself respectable. I've been the only respectable woman here besides Sarah. I'm not going to stay in this house, which will be avoided by every decent woman, with a man that will be pointed at by every decent man, with her in it as missus—as missus'—

The woman laughed bitterly, tauntingly, and threw a foul name in the face of Zita, and then backed, with a sneer on her lips and hate in her eyes.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

PURGATORY.

SUDDENLY, and for the first time, did the thought flare through Zita's brain and scorch it — that she had compromised her character.

Now only did she see why Mark had refused to look at her; now only understand what he meant when he said that she had sold herself body and soul; now only comprehended what the laughter signified when the chairman in court had suggested that she was the 'companion' of Drownlands, a suggestion which had been received with titters. She remembered how then her brow had become hot, her heart had beat fast; she was sensible that something had been said that hurt her maiden pride, something that lowered her in the esteem of those assembled in the court. But she had not sounded the meaning of the insinuation, and had not thought what was really the sting in the words which wounded her.

Zita possessed a considerable amount of pride —a different sort of pride, maybe, from any that we can conceive in our stations in life. It was not vanity. She concerned herself little about her personal appearance, and made no effort by dress to display her beauty. She knew she was a good-looking girl, and was indifferent to the fact. She had no education of the sort which we prize; but she had stood on platforms, her feet level with the shoulders of the general public, and she had come, instinctively, without being able to account to herself for it, to regard herself as possessing a character, a dignity of her own above that which belonged to the members of the general public. She who stood above it actually must live up to her level, and stand above it in moral strength and integrity.

Zita had a simple and innocent mind. She had been reared in a van, had led a rambling life, her sole associate had been a father—a kindly man, gentle, good after his lights, and very careful of her welfare. The fact of her having been shifted perpetually from place to place had prevented her forming associates, making fast friendships, so that she had really had none to affect her mind save her father, and had grown to womanhood a singular combination of shrewdness and simplicity. Thus her heart was fresh and childlike, whilst her brain was keen in all that concerned commerce. She had

been carefully screened by the Cheap Jack father from everything that could taint the sweetness of her innocence and sully the crystalline purity of her mind.

There was one thing she had never learned from her father, one thing of which till this moment she had no conception—the power of public opinion. She had acquired in her vagrant life an idea that the general public was a something to be laughed at and laughed with, that was to be humoured, cajoled, befooled; but it had never been suspected by her that the public could utter its voice and make the heart quake, breathe on and blast a reputation, could bite and poison the blood.

Now, suddenly, a veil was lifted, and she saw the general public in a new light, and felt the terrible power over her life and happiness that it exercised.

No man is so free as the man without a home. If he has committed an indiscretion, he pulls up his tent-pegs, moves away, and is forgotten. But a man who remains on the scene of his indiscretion is haunted by it ever after. The remembrance clings to him as the shirt of Nessus. It is never forgotten, never forgiven. As long as the van crawled over the face of the country, changing the atmosphere that surrounded it, it eluded the force of public opinion. Its inmates paid no tax to it; were not registered on its books. But hardly had

Zita become settled before its burden fell upon her.

'Unsay what you have said!' cried Zita, grasping Mrs. Tunkiss by the arm.

'It is true. It is what every one has been saying; and, as you see, Mark Runham won't have anything to do with you. You thought to catch him, did you? You've been angling for him and the master, and taken the one as bids highest. 'Tis like a Cheap Jack that. You're young, but bold as brass and cankered as iron.'

'Silence, you false-mouthed woman!'

'Can you silence all the tongues in the Fen? There's not a man over his pipe and ale in the tavern ain't jeering at you. There's not a woman over her soapsuds and scrubbing-brush ain't crying shame on you. But what can you expect of a vagabond but vice? I spit at you.'

Zita cast the woman from her, and turned and threw herself on her knees at the broken table, buried her face in her hands, and burst into tears.

Drownlands waved imperiously to the housekeeper to leave, and the woman withdrew, muttering and casting malignant glances at the broken, prostrate girl.

The table was between the master of Prickwillow and Zita. His knuckles rested on the will. He leaned on them, and looked down on the shining head that was laid low before him.

Zita's hair was cut short, and her neck showed as well as her rounded cheek.

He did not speak. He breathed heavily through his distended nostrils. He waited, not knowing what direction her thoughts might take, what resolve her mind would form.

There were but few alternatives among which she might choose. She could not resume her life as Cheap Jack without taking an assistant, and from that course she shrank with maidenly repugnance, rightly estimating its dangers. If she were to throw herself among the wanderers who frequented fairs, it would be to court ruin. Was it not probable that she would maintain her resolution to remain at Prickwillow, with this difference, that she would accept his first offer, and become his wife, to save her fair name from reproach? So far as Drownlands could see, this was the only means whereby she could extricate herself from her difficulties, and his heart swelled within him at the hope that opened before him. But he saw clearly that he must allow her to work to this solution by herself unassisted. A word from him would mar everything.

He accordingly stood with bent brows and pale face, the furrows deeply graven on his forehead and seaming his cheek, his lips set, looking steadily at the chestnut-gold head and the delicate bowed neck.

There is no agony more terrible than the agony of the soul, and among the many anguishes

with which that can be affected none equals in intensity and poignancy that which is caused by the sense of the loss of the respect of men.

There was an ineffable humiliation in the thought of the light in which she—Zita—had come to be regarded, if what Mrs. Tunkiss said was true. The girl who errs through over-trust in a lover, who has believed his word, his oath, is looked down on, but deserves some pity. But Zita did not occupy such a position, had not the same claim to be dealt by lightly. She had—so men thought, so men said—deliberately and calculatingly sold herself to Drownlands. Her degradation had been a piece of sordid merchandise, with haggling over terms.

That was true which Leehanna said. She was the subject-matter of talk in the taverns, of coarse and ribald jokes, of calculation of the chances she had of retaining the affections of Drownlands, of remark on her craft, her dexterity in laying hold of and managing this intractable tyrant of the Fens.

But perhaps the intensest anguish-point lay in the thought that Mark, who had loved her, or liked her—Mark, whom she had loved, whom she loved still, regarded her with disgust, held himself aloof from her, as one unworthy even of his pity, as a cold, calculating wanton.

As all these thoughts passed through the mind of Zita, the pain was so excessive that she could have shrieked, and felt relief in shrieking; that

she worked with her feet on the planks of the floor, as though to bore with them a hole down which she might disappear and hide her shame.

The drops ran off her brow like the drops on a window after rain—long-gathering trickles of moisture, then a great drop, immediately succeeded by another accumulation, and again another drop. Save for the working of her feet on the floor and the movement of her fingers, she was motionless. Drownlands contemplated her steadily. He saw her, in her anguish of mind, twine and untwine her long fingers, then pluck at and strip off chips of the table where he had broken it, put them between her teeth and bite them, but still with lowered brow and eyes that she could not raise for shame. He could see flushes pass over her, succeeded by deadly pallor. It was as though flames were flickering about her head, shooting up and enveloping throat and cheek and brow, then dying down and leaving a deathly cold behind. A soul in this present life was prematurely suffering its purgatory.

Then she laid her hands flat on the table before her, then folded them, as children fold their hands in prayer, and she was still, as though her pulses had ceased to beat and her lungs to play. Then again ensued a paroxysm of distress, in which the fingers writhed and became knotted, and tears broke from her eyes and sobs from her heart.

How long would this last.

What resolutions were forming and unforming under that crown of shining locks, in that heavily-charged heart?

The door was thrust open, and in came Sarah, the maid with St. Vitus' dance.

'Please,' she said, 'there be three gem'men from Ely downstairs. They say they be come after their toastin'-forks.'

CHAPTER XXXIV.

WITH TOASTING-FORKS.

ZITA rose from her knees.

'Tell them to wait, and I will be down directly,' she said. 'I made them a promise, and I must keep it. I am glad they are here; they can witness the will, now that Mark Runham and Leehanna Tunkiss are gone.'

Drownlands was surprised. The girl had regained her composure; and from the look of her face he was assured that she had formed her resolution.

'That is right,' said he; 'things remain as arranged.'

'I cannot go away,' said Zita in a low voice. 'Here I am, and here I must remain. If I have done wrong to stay here, the wrong is done. If I have been foolish to accept your hospitality, the folly is past recall.' She looked over her shoulder to see that Sarah had withdrawn.

'Yes; I promised you I would remain here, and here I will remain, on a condition.'

He held up the will.

'Yes, on condition that you leave everything you have as I shall direct.'

'I leave it all to you.'

'The will must be written afresh,' said Zita; 'a change must be made in it. You have bequeathed everything to me, and because of that, evil thoughts will rise up in folks' minds, and evil words will pass over their lips. Even Mark thinks ill of me. I did not think Mark could have done that.' She heaved a sigh, and drew her hand across her eyes.

'Master,' said she, after a pause, 'you had no right to make that will and leave me all. I am not your niece. I shall never stand nearer to you than I do now. I have no claim on your house or lands. But Kainie has. She is your own sister's child. You must alter your will and leave everything to her.'

'I said I would give her nought.'

'And that made Mark believe me to be bad. I will not have anything of yours. I will have you make the writing out anew, and bequeath everything to Kainie—on the same condition, if you will, that I remain here all your days. I do not say, Give Kainie everything now. I have no right to say that. I do not say, Give me nothing at any time. I shall have a right to some payment, or some acknowledgment of my services. But what I do say is that I will not be your heir hereafter. Kainie has a claim on

you that I have not. If I were to be enriched with house and lands by you, then the evil that is thought of me would be confirmed. But folks may say what they will, when, some day, after you are gone, the property changes hands and falls to Kainie; they cannot think I have been so wicked as was supposed. And I shall have repaid you for your kindness to me, in that I have saved you from committing a great injustice. Mark said I would do anything—sell body and soul—for profit. He will come to see that he was wrong there.'

Drownlands gazed on the girl with incredulity. She had hit on an arrangement that had not suggested itself to his mind. He could not believe that she was serious in her purpose.

'I will remain with you,' continued Zita, 'on the clear understanding that Kainie is to be your heir, and I would wish this understanding to be generally made known. Some day, when I am old and ugly, and you are dead and gone, then, when the new folks come into Prickwillow, I'll harness the horse and start as a Cheap Jack once more. Then I can take a man to mind the horse, when I do the business of a Cheap Jack. No one can say wrong of me then. When Mark Runham comes into this place'—

'Mark Runham will never be here.'

'He must be here, if this falls some day to Kainie.'

'That does not follow.'

'Of course it follows, if he marries Kainie.'

'Mark — marry Kainie? What do you mean?'

'I told you that Mark would have nothing more to say to me, because he was bound to another. I would not say to whom, for that was his secret. But now he has let it out himself. He is going to take Kainie home to Crumbland this evening.'

Drownlands started and threw over a chair.

'You are mistaken. You do not know.' He paced the room in agitation.

'I do know,' answered Zita. 'It is because he was bound to Kainie that he gave me up. Now he is going to take her to him for better for worse. Lawk! how dull men are in these matters—where girls see clear.'

'You are greatly mistaken.'

'No, I am not mistaken. How can you fail to understand when he speaks so plain?'

Drownlands folded his arms and walked hurriedly up and down the room. Presently he turned to Zita and said, 'You are serious when you say you will not have me make you my heir?'

'I am truly resolved,' answered the girl. 'Then he can no more say that I have sold myself body and soul for profits.'

'Let no will be made.'

'That will not do. You must rewrite it, and it must make Kainie your heir. Only on that

condition will I remain in this house with you.'

'And you believe her to be your rival, who has snatched Mark from your arms?'

'I know it is so. He could not help himself. He was tied to her.'

'Mark is a Runham. A Runham may betray a woman, but never marry one who has no fortune.'

'More is the reason why you should give one to Kainie.'

'Were I to make you my heir,—there is no saying,—he might take you for the sake of this place and my savings; and, by Heaven, I will have no Runham own acres of mine, if I can prevent it!'

'He would not do that—he could not take me. He is too just and true to throw over Kainie. He may think ill of me, but I do not think so badly of him. I tried to buy of her the rights she had in him, but she would not sell them. Then I saw it was all up between Mark and me.'

'This is strange—this is very strange!' said Drownlands, turning a perplexed face on the girl as he paced the room. 'I know what is in a Runham better than you. The Runhams marry for money, not for love. Come here, Zita. What would you say were you to discover that you were mistaken about Mark and Kainie?'

'I am not mistaken.'

'Suppose, some day, that you found that he was free?'

She was silent.

'And yet he would never marry you without money. He would not be a Runham to do that. If, however, he thought you were to be my heir, he might do so, or wait till I am gone and then take you; but he will never think of you if you are poor. Be it as you propose. I will rewrite my will. I will leave to you nothing, bequeath to Kainie all.'

'Then I will remain with you.'

'As long as I live?'

She nodded her head.

'You will swear to this?'

Her eyes were full, her bosom heaving; she held out both hands, and he clasped them.

'I must go downstairs,' she said, after a struggle to gain composure. 'The justices will want their toasting-forks.'

'Keep them amused for a while. They shall witness my new will.'

Zita proceeded to her room, found the articles that she had promised, and descended to the sitting-room, where she found three of the magistrates, all laymen; the clerical members of the Bench thinking it unecclesiastical to come after toasting-forks. The red-faced chairman, Mr. Christian, was there; Admiral Abbott; and another, named Wilkins. They were all merry;

they had been drinking, and they felt sensible relief that they were not cumbered by the presence of the ecclesiastical magistrates. They were also conscious of great buoyancy of spirits, due to the fact that they were beyond the shadow of the towers of Ely, and no longer within the numbing circle of cathedral decorum. Zita's arrival was hailed uproariously, with laughter and loud words. The gentlemen jumped from their chairs, and with effusion insisted on shaking hands.

'We've rode over,' said Mr. Christian, 'but couldn't persuade Sir Bates to mount a horse again. The very looks of one makes his colour fade. Nothing would induce him — not the prospect of a toasting-fork. I say, Abbott, if we could have promised the canon a kiss of those ruby lips, eh? Would that have drawn him? How now, you comical Jill?—you who upset the dignity of the Court! And to venture on bribery and corruption—you pretty little rogue! We might have had you up. What say you, Abbott? Shall we indict her for the attempt to poison the springs of justice? It is a case under common law. Fine or imprisonment? Which shall it be, Wilkins?'

'Now, come,' said the magistrate addressed, 'no law here; we have had enough of that to-day. Here are weapons. Arm thee, arm thee, Sir Christian, knight of the blazing countenance and the purple nose. Queen of

Cheap Jacks, let your gay red-flowered kerchief be the prize. I defy thee to the death, Christian. Up with you on to the table, Queen of Cheap Jacks, or upon the mantelshelf—anywhere away from the clash of blades and the soil of battle. Come on, Christian! And after thee, Old Salt the Admiral; but, Lord! he will swash about with his toasting-fork as if 'twere a cutlass. Come on, Christian, and he who wins rides home wearing her favour.'

Justice Wilkins brandished one of the toasting-forks, and, putting himself in a posture of attack, shouted again for his opponent.

Mr. Christian at once snatched and flourished his weapon, and the two half-tipsy men began to make passes at each other.

'Bright eyes looking on! A fair maid's favour as the prize! Ah, Christian, you're off your guard; you are using your foil wildly. The man is drunk! Heigh! To the heart! I have run you through! Down with your blade, sir!' Wilkins shouted as he charged home, and drove the toasting-fork up into the handle against the breast of his adversary. 'Abbott! gallop off for Sir Bates! Make him come to shrive Christian. Rest his soul! he was a jolly dog, but too fond of lasses and the bottle. Admiral, help me; we will compose his epitaph. No, no, Christian, that is a breach of rules. You're dead, man; dead as a stone, with a stroke through your heart. Didn't you feel the

toasting-fork tickle your ribs? Stand aside, or lie dead on the hearthrug. You are out of the game now. Come on, Admiral Abbott. It lies between you and me; Christian, you dog, you are dead, and must not interfere. That stroke will let some of the port wine out of your gizzard. Keep in the rear—you are a dead man. If you walk, it is your ghost. It is Abbott's turn with me now.'

'Wilkins, your tongue runs away with you. I'll cut it off and wear it in my hat. I'm your man.'

Thereupon Admiral Abbott, armed with his toasting-fork, strutted into the place lately occupied by Christian.

'No,' said he; 'Wilkins, you cheat; you took a scurvy advantage over my dear deceased brother Christian. You shall not play me the same trick. You have the window behind you.'

'I did not consider it. Change sides.'

'No, I will not have the advantage over you either. We will fight with the daylight athwart our blades.'

'Then the Queen of Cheap Jacks must shift quarters, to see that all is fair.'

'Let her shift,' said Abbott. 'I am not going to be killed or to kill you at a disadvantage. Ready!'

The passage of arms between Wilkins and Abbott was as brief as that between him and

Christian. A stroke from the admiral, who used his tool as a cutlass, bent the soft metal of the toasting-fork of his opponent.

'Weapon broken. Surrender!' shouted Abbott. 'Now, Wilkins, stand aside. I am conqueror, and claim the red rag.'

'That's a way to ask! Like the bear you are, Abbott. Down on one knee—I won't say gracefully, for you can't do that—and ask in courteous tone. Red rag indeed!—a crimson favour.'

'He can't kneel,' said Christian. 'He'd never get up if he were once down.'

'Admiral! I could swear the Cheap Jack Queen has been crying. There are tears on her cheek and a drench of rain in her brown eyes. It is for you, Christian, you lucky dog; you caused them to fall, because I ran you through, and Her Royal Highness weeps for her knight bleeding his life-tide away.'

At this moment Drownlands entered the room, and was saluted by the three magistrates.

'We have been fighting,' said the admiral, 'and I am the conqueror. If you are disposed to part with the pretty housekeeper, I will carry her off *en croupe* on my horse.'

Drownlands disdained an answer.

'Gentlemen,' said he, 'now that you are here, let me ask a favour of you. Pray put your

hands to this paper and witness my signature to this my last will and testament.'

'I hope you have put the Queen of Cheap Jacks down for something handsome. If you have done that, we will sign cheerfully.'

'Not for a penny,' answered Drownlands. 'Everything I have goes to my niece. Here is ink and here a pen. Gentlemen, this is my true act and deed.'

'My hand shakes,' said Christian; 'I have been laughing, and cannot hold a pen.'

'And mine is jarred,' said Wilkins, 'with the thundering blows of that swashbuckler, Abbott.'

Jesting, laughing, the three men complied with the request of Drownlands, hardly regarding what they were about.

'I say, Abbott,' said Wilkins, 'what was that promise that fell from ruby lips relative to an epergne?'

'We were to raffle for one,' said the admiral.

'Can't do it,' said Christian. 'We have not got the others here. We'll hoist Bates on to a horse and make him come another day, when this confounded business of the riots is over.'

'You have got the favour, Abbott,' said Wilkins, 'but not by fair swordsmanship. Whether you carry it to Ely is another matter. Christian, shall he hoist it at the end of his toasting-fork and ride? We'll give him a hundred yards, and then pursue, and he who

overtakes, captures the favour and carries it into the city.'

'Done—we'll race the admiral for it.' Then, turning to Zita, 'We'll come another day and raffle for the epergne at a guinea apiece. The pool goes to you. Now then, brother justices, away we go!'

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE JACK O' LANTERNS.

'TAKE it, and keep it,' said Drownlands, handing the will to Zita. 'You can read. It is as you desired, and on the same condition as before. That is as you promised.'

'Yes,' said the girl; 'with that I am content.'

She put the will in her bosom.

'Then,' said Drownlands in a tone of sad bitterness, 'for life and till death we are united.'

'After a fashion, to keep apart.'

'Yes, united to be separate.'

'Like a pair of wheels,' said Zita. 'They keep the concern going, but have it always between them.'

The day had closed in, and Zita retired to her room to sit at the window and look out at the dead uniformity of the fen, and the white line of horizon between it and the darkness above, like a white fringe to a pall. She desired solitude, that she might review what was past.

The weather was cold. There had been

frost, hard and biting, and the ice clad the water. The snow that had been spread over the land had in part disappeared, licked up by the dry wind that scaled the waters, and the land from whiteness had turned to blackness.

The lakes of frozen water would have attracted many skaters during the day, had not the engrossing excitement relative to the trial of the rioters engaged the public attention.

The frost had set in with redoubled hardness on the morrow of the riot, and in four days even the Lark was turned to stone within its embankments.

As Zita looked out into the night, she could see the heavy sky, burdened with black clouds, that were ragged as a torn fringe, or a moth-eaten pall, about the black hard bank of the river, that stood up sharply against the sky.

The cold was so biting in the fireless room that Zita drew the velvet curtains about her, which were suspended over her window, covered her shoulders, and wrapped them about her bosom. There was no light in the room save the wan reflection from the horizon. Had there been, she would have formed a pretty picture, folded in crimson velvet, with her oval face and dark amber hair peeping out of the folds.

She looked dreamily through the window.

A wave of regret had come over her after the exaltation caused by the sense of self-sacrifice.

She considered how that she had loved Mark,

had valued his regard for herself, had delighted in his society. He had never said to her that he loved her, yet there had been a look in his blue eyes, a pressure of his fingers when he took her hand, a softness of intonation in his voice when he spoke to her, that had said more than words, that had assured her heart that she was dear to him. And how happy she had been when she believed that! A solitary child, with no belongings and belonging to none, a waif thrown upon the desolate fens, she had found herself lifted into a new region of brightness. Then Mark had become cool, and had held aloof from her. She had discovered that he was engaged to Kainie, and could not become disentangled from this tie. He had been constrained to resign himself to it. Now his interest, his sympathies, were enlisted on behalf of that girl, because she was treated with injustice and was exposed to danger. Now he was about to take Kainie to his house—now, this very evening.

A feeling of resentment against the girl who stood between herself and happiness swelled in Zita's heart; Kainie threw down the palace of delight she had built up in the cloudland of hope and fancy. Kainie snatched Mark from her; and it was for Kainie that she—Zita—had given up the inheritance offered her by Drownlands.

In the darkness Zita's brow darkened. Angry feelings surged in her bosom and sent waves of

fire through her pulses. She would defy the world. What need she care for the chatter of slanderous tongues? Conscious of her own integrity, she would brave public opinion.

She snatched the will from her bosom, that she might tear it in pieces, and then she would run to the master and bid him make another in her own favour, as first proposed. Why should she not be his heir?

If Kainie robbed her of Mark, might not she retaliate and take from her the inheritance of Drownlands?

If she were struck, might she not strike back? Did Kainie need lands and houses? As Mark's wife, she would be rich without her uncle's estate added to Crumbland, whereas she—Zita—had not a particle of soil on which to set her foot and say it was her own. Had not the master of Prickwillow a right to do what he would with his own? Kainie had done nothing for him, and she—Zita—was devoting her life to his service.

As she looked out of the window, musing on these things, she saw that the light on the horizon had faded, or that the great curtain of cloud had set over it and had obscured it. Something, where she believed that the embankment ran, now attracted, without greatly engaging, her attention.

A minute flash of light travelled a little distance, and was then extinguished. Presently

another wavering speck appeared, and then again all was dark.

'The Jack o' Lanterns are about,' said Zita.

Her thoughts recurred to her troubles.

A recoil of better feeling set in and washed over her heart.

'No,' said she, 'I could not have borne it. It would have killed me to have Mark believe that I was sold body and soul. Let him take Kainie, and with Kainie let him have Prick-willow when it falls;—but let him not think ill of me.'

She started up. She replaced the will in her bosom.

'I will go to Red Wings,' she said. 'He is there with Kainie. He said he would take her away this night. I will go and tell him all. I will show him what I have here;' she touched her bosom where lay the will. 'When he has heard my story and has seen that, he will think better of me.'

She descended the staircase. At the foot she found the master.

'There are Jack o' Lanterns in the fens,' she said.

'Folks say that they have seen them,' he replied. 'I never have. They were plentiful before so much marsh was reclaimed.'

'I have seen them,' said Zita.

'Pshaw!' laughed he. 'There are no Jack of Lanterns in winter. Whither are you going?'

'On the embankment; perhaps on the ice. I wish to be alone.'

She drew a shawl over her head and opened the door. Drownlands followed her to the doorstep.

At that moment he also for a moment saw a twinkle on the embankment.

'That is what you call Jack o' Lanterns,' said he. 'It is some ganger going home. Shall I attend you?'

'I desire to be alone.'

Then Drownlands went within, and Zita walked on till she reached the highway that ran below the embankment. It was so dark there that she mounted the steep slope, so as to have the advantage of what little light still hung in the sky and was reflected by the frozen surface of the river.

As she ascended, an uneasy sensation came over her—a feeling that she was in the presence of human beings whom she neither saw nor heard. She stood still, listening. Then, stepping forward, she was again conscious that she was close upon some invisible person. Feeling alarmed, Zita was about to retrace her steps, when a light was flashed in her eyes and a hand grasped her shoulder. Thereupon a voice said in a low tone, 'It is that wench of Drownlands'.' Then she was aware that several men surrounded her. They had been crouching on the ground for concealment, at the sound of her

approaching foot. Now they rose and pressed about her. She could distinguish that these were all men, and that they had black kerchiefs over their faces with holes cut in them, through which their eyes peered. One alone was not so disguised, and he it was who spoke to her.

'Unhappy girl! You do not return. Go your ways along the bank, and no harm will be done to you. We have no quarrel with you, but we have with your master. This night we strike off a score, pay a debt.'

The voice was that of Ephraim Beamish.

'Throw her in. Send her under the ice. She's a bad lot,' said one of the men.

'Make an end of all that belongs to Tiger Ki,' said another.

'We do not fight with women,' said Beamish. 'She shall go, but not return to Prickwillow.'

'What are you about? What harm are you doing?' asked Zita.

'We are serving out chastisement to your master for what he has done to our lads,' answered Pip.

'You will not hurt him?'

'Not in person.'

'What, then, will you do?'

'Go your way. We are letting the water out over his land.'

Ephraim conducted Zita a little way along the tow-path on the bank.

'Attend to me,' said he. 'Go anywhere you

will except back to Prickwillow. We have our men drawn across the way. You cannot pass, it is in vain for you to attempt it. Keep to the bank, and keep at a distance from us.'

'Where is Mark Runham?'

'I have not seen him.'

'He is not in this affair with you?'

'Mark? of course he is not. He knows nothing of our purpose.'

Zita advanced along the path. She was uneasy; desirous, if possible, to warn Drownlands.

Presently she heard a rush of water.

She turned, and was caught almost immediately by one of the men.

'It is of no use your attempting to go home,' he said. 'It is of no use your thinking of telling Tiger Ki to be on his guard. It is now too late.' The man took her wrist and said, 'Go your way, but take care not to step on the ice—not as you value your life.'

'The ice?—why so?'

'Listen.'

A shrill whine—then a crash. The icy surface of the Lark had split, then gone down in fragments under its own weight, as the water that had sustained it was withdrawn.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A RETURN BLOW.

ZITA hurried along the tow-path. Her mind was in a tumult. The full force of the words of Ephraim she could not understand. He and his comrades were letting the waters of the river Lark over Drownlands' farm, that she knew; but to what an extent they would overflow, and what amount of injury they might do, that was what she was incapable of judging. It was a relief to her mind that no personal violence was contemplated. The water that was let out could be pumped back again. The Fens were wont to be flooded at times, and the mills could always throw the flood from off them.

It was natural that her thoughts should revert to certain words that had been dropped by the men — words that had fallen on her ears like drops of fire. Why had Pip Beamish spoken to her as an 'unhappy girl'? Why had she been referred to as 'belonging to Drownlands,' as

'Tiger Ki's wench'? The tone in which these words had been used had conveyed more insult than the words themselves. They implied that she was sold, as Mark had said, body and soul, to the master of Prickwillow. Mark was not alone in his ill opinion of her.

How had this opinion come to be formed? Surely not from the fact that she was staying on in the house where she had been sheltered when her father died? Every one must know that it was impossible for her to leave it, unless she deserted her van and her wares.

There had been nothing in Drownlands' conduct towards her in public to breed this opinion. The spring of the scandal must have been in Leehanna Tunkiss. That woman had viewed the presence of Zita at Prickwillow with jealousy, and had come to hate her.

In the first gush of womanly sympathy with a forlorn child, left solitary, bereaved of her only parent, the housekeeper had urged Zita to accept the hospitality offered her, and had welcomed her when she transferred herself from the van in the outhouse into a room in the farm dwelling. But no sooner did the keen eye of Leehanna observe that Drownlands watched Zita with interest, and that the girl was acquiring an extraordinary influence over him, than her envy was roused, and she was filled with alarm lest her own position should be undermined, and she should have to make way for the girl whom she

had so readily taken under the shelter of Prickwillow roof.

Zita had not failed to notice the growing malevolence exhibited towards her by this woman. She had endeavoured to keep out of her way, but had not laid much store on her ill-humour. Now she saw, or suspected, that Leehanna had been poisoning the minds of the neighbourhood against her, and she had little doubt that the alienation of Mark was due in a measure to the slanders of Mrs. Tunkiss.

Presently Zita saw the light that shone from Kainie's window. The girl had not as yet deserted her habitation. A little muslin blind was drawn across the casement, and the candle-light shone hazily through that. During the frost, when the waters were chained down, the windmills were not worked, so that there was no immediate necessity for a successor to take the place of the girl-miller. No doubt that Mark would inform the Commissioners that Kainie's charge of the mill was at an end, and that it was incumbent on them to immediately look out for a successor. But Kainie had not as yet departed, though it might be she was preparing for her 'flitting.'

Had Mark come for her? Was he with her now? Or was she sitting in her cottage with throbbing heart, waiting for him to arrive?

Was it a fact that Mark Runham grasped at money? It was not true. Drownlands had

charged him falsely in that. He was taking Kainie, who had nothing. With a twinge, Zita thought how that she herself was enriching her rival with what might, had she willed it, become her own. With a sickness at heart, Zita looked forward to the day when Kainie would join the acres of Prickwillow to those of Crumbland, and bid Zita go forth a wanderer and destitute—and it was her own doing.

Was she one who sold body and soul for profits? She might have been Drownlands' wife; she had refused this. She might have been his heir; she had refused that: and Kainie reaped all the advantages that sprang out of her refusals.

No! There was something that was dearer to Zita even than profits.

As Zita approached Red Wings, the dog, standing on the brick platform, began to bark. Zita called to him, and he came to her bounding. On her former visits she had brought Wolf something in her pocket. Now that he reached her, he thrust his nose into her hand beseechingly.

She halted at the tuft of thorn-bushes and flags below the platform, and seated herself there, throwing her arm round the dog. She would not present herself at the door of the hut, and receive a rough greeting from Kainie. She would wait and see whether Mark were there before she made her presence known. The explanation she had to make, the story to tell,

she would in preference make and tell to Mark. She did not forget that she had struck Kainie, and she knew that her chances of placing her conduct in a favourable light were greater with a man than with a woman.

A dark figure of a man issued from the cottage door and stood on the platform, looking round. After a moment he went back to the door, saying—

'There is no one that I can see, but the night is dark, Kainie.'

The voice was that of Mark.

He did not re-enter the cottage, but, standing where he was, he said—

'Come, Kainie, it is time for us to be off. My mother is expecting you.'

The girl issued from the hovel.

'Mark,' said she, 'has she really consented to receive me?'

'Yes, she has.'

'Yet I know that she has refused to see me, and even to hear about me.'

'That is true, but now she has given way. I could not allow you to remain here. I took a firm stand with my mother, and she admitted that I was right, and yielded. Now, have you got all ready for the sledge?'

'I have packed everything.'

'Then jump on to the sleigh, and I will run you along upon the ice, which is in prime condition.'

Zita's arm convulsively nipped the dog.

How happy she had been on that day when Mark had run her along on the ice on the same bones that were now to bear her successful rival!

Wolf protested against the pressure of her arm by a growl.

'Where are you, Wolf?' called Mark.

Zita released the dog, and he sprang upon the platform.

'I wonder what the old fellow means,' said the young man. 'He does not usually give false alarms. I daresay he's puzzled at our proceedings. Something affecting his interests is in view, Kainie, and he can't understand it. It is so dark one can't see far; but had any one been coming, he would have given tongue lustily.'

'Perhaps it may be Pip.'

'Pip will have to be careful for the next day or two. If he be caught, 'twill go hard with him for certain.'

'But you will get him away from the Fens?'

'Yes. I am making arrangements. If he can keep hidden for a few more days and nights, I shall have managed matters, and be able to clear him off; to clear him not only from the Fens, but out of England. Now, however, we must think of you. Take with you only such traps as you need immediately, and which you can carry in your arms or on your lap. I'll return for the rest to-morrow.'

'I shall leave the fire burning and the light on the table.'

'Yes, for Pip when he comes. Folk will think nothing of seeing the light, making sure it is yours. He can hide here till I am ready to send him away; and Wolf shall remain to give him notice if any one approaches. I'll tie him up.'

Kainie re-entered the cottage, and Mark proceeded to tie Wolf by a piece of twine that he had in his pocket.

Whilst he was thus engaged, Kainie came out with her little package, and stood watching the proceedings of the young man.

The dog was restless, and objected to being fastened.

'Don't be angry with me, Mark,' said Kainie, 'if I ask you a question.'

'No; what may it be?'

'It concerns that wretched creature — that Cheap Jack girl. You were rather taken with her at first, Mark, till you found out what she was. You are quite sure you don't fancy her no longer?'

The young fellow had been stooping over the dog. He stood up and said gravely—

'Kainie! I regard her now no more than I do the dirt under my soles.'

'Hark! what is that?'

The sound was that of a gasp or sob.

'There is certainly some one here,' said Mark. 'Bring a light.'

'You need not,' said Zita, rising from behind the thorns. 'It is I.'

'You here, Zita?'

'Yes. I heard what you said of me.'

'I am sorry for that.'

'It is cruelly false.'

'I cannot go into that matter. What has brought you here at this time o' night?'

'What has brought her here?' repeated Kainie. 'There is no need to ask that, Mark; the wretched creature is running after you.'

'You must go back,' said the young man.

'Yes, go back—to your dear master,' sneered Kainie.

'I must speak. I must justify myself,' said Zita, with vehemence. 'You wrong me in your thoughts; you wrong me in your words. I am not what you suppose. I am not a bold, bad girl. I do not sell myself for profits. I am in Drownlands' house because I cannot help myself. I have nowhere else whither to go. Why should you and Kainie believe evil of me? Why should'—

'I cannot argue with you,' said Mark. 'This is not the place; this is not the time. I am sorry for you. I can say no more. I thought better of you once.'

'Go, you Cheap Jackess,' said Kainie. 'Unless you had a heart lost to shame, you'd not have come here after Mark at night.'

'You misjudge me in this as in other things,'

said Zita, bursting into tears. 'I came here for your good.'

'That's a fine tale,' sneered Kainie. 'We want no good from you, nor do we expect figs of thistles or grapes of thorns.'

Mark said nothing, but stepped from the platform.

'I entreat you to listen to me,' said Zita, catching his arm. 'It is not true that Drownlands has left me everything.'

'I cannot attend to this now,' said he, disengaging himself from her grasp. But she again seized him.

'Unsay what you said!' she exclaimed. Her anger was rising and overmastering her grief. 'Unsay those ugly words—that I am the dirt under your feet.'

'I said—but never mind. I regret that you overheard me use such an expression.'

'That is not unsaying it.'

Kainie came up and struck Zita with the full force of her heavy hand across the face.

'Take that,' she said; 'I have owed it you. Now the debt is repaid.'

Then she stepped on the ice with a 'Mark, I am ready.'

'Go!' cried Zita in towering wrath, stung with pain, maddened with humiliation. 'Go—go under the ice, both of you! I care not! I care not!'

CHAPTER XXXVII.

A CATHERINE WHEEL.

THE words were hardly out of Zita's mouth before they were repented. The anger, the desire for revenge, which had spurted up in her heart, was abated as rapidly as it had risen.

Once before she had spoken in violence of anger, and had speedily contradicted her words by her acts. She had bidden Mark go and be hanged or transported for aught she cared; yet no sooner did she learn that he was in actual danger, than she had interfered to deliver him. She had fought for him with Drownlands, and had thrust herself into the witness-box to exculpate him.

Stinging now under the moral pain of the sense of wrong done to her, that wounded her in her honour, stinging also under the physical pain caused by the blow of Kainie, a girl for whom she had made the greatest sacrifices, in a blind and inconsiderate explosion of resentment, she had allowed Mark and Kainie, unwarned of their

danger, to commit themselves to the treacherous ice.

Repentance came too late. The words had been spoken which hinted danger, but the hint was too vague to be regarded, even to be understood. Mark had started, running Kainie on his sledge over the polished surface of the channel, before Zita had recovered herself and realised what would be the consequences of her neglect.

Then, with a cry, the girl ran along the bank. She called to Mark, imploring him to return. She called, telling him that the ice was broken. Then she stayed, out of breath, her pulses bounding, the sweat streaming off her brow, and the tears racing down her cheeks.

She found that it was not possible for her to catch up the sledge, that flew like a swallow over the glassy ice, and which was invisible in the darkness. She found that the wind was blowing in her face, and carrying her voice behind her, away from those whose attention she desired to arrest.

In her despair, she threw herself on her knees and beat her head and breast.

'I am worse than what they thought of me! I am worse than that murderer Drownlands. He killed one, and I kill two. Oh that I had died in their place!'

Again she sprang to her feet, and again she cried to those who were speeding far away, and

bade them return. She was sensible, as she called, that she could do nothing to arrest them in their course. The horror of the situation was insupportable, and in a wave of despair that swept over her, Zita was ready to fling herself into the canal.

There are moments of life when instantaneously a whole prospect opens before the inner eye—call that eye what you will. In a second of time Zita saw the consequences of her neglect mirrored before her with intense and terrible vividness. It was as though the whole sequence of events that must follow was unrolled before her eye, and, clear as in broadest day, she saw the sledge, propelled by Mark, approach the dangerous spot where the arch of ice stood unsupported, and when the additional weight was thrown on it, must come crashing down. She heard the whine of the cracking surface, as the sleigh reached it. She saw the whole mass of ice, together with sleigh, Mark, and Kainie, go down with a crash, impelled by the velocity of the pace at which they had been going—saw them shoot under the water, and the sheets of fractured ice that encumbered the surface of the shrunken river. She heard the cry of Mark, the scream of Kainie. She saw them battling with their hands beneath the surface. It was to her as though she were looking from above on the glassy sheet that lay broken, but yet encasing the water. She could see through it, and watch

the expiring efforts of Mark and Kainie, behold them struggling with their hands to break through or push aside the ice-plate that lay between their mouths and air. She could see their straining eyes fixed reproachfully on her through the transparent screen. In her fancy she was now running and beckoning to the only patch of open water through which escape was possible. And yet they would not attend; either they misunderstood her signals, or they mistrusted her motives.

She beheld how their efforts relaxed, their palms patted listlessly against the ice, their fingers picked with feeble effort at the cracks, how the light of intelligence died out of their eyes, how their lips gasped and drew in water.

Then to her fancy they went down, Kainie first, Mark next.

After that there rose about her, as a cloud, a mass of black figures, pointing at her with their fingers, and from every finger-point flashed an electric spark.

'Murderess—double murderess! Thou who didst judge Drownlands, judge thine own self. Thou who didst condemn, condemn thyself.'

Then Wolf came to her. He had gnawed through the cord that had bound him.

Zita clasped him round the neck.

'Oh, Wolf! Wolf!' she cried. 'Go after them—fly—stay them. Snap at Mark's clothes. Bite Kainie. Hold them back!'

She indicated the direction that the sledge had taken, and the dog ran out on the ice.

Zita looked after him. Would he be able to track them on the frozen sheet? Would the scent lie on the congealed water?

If Wolf did come up with his mistress and Mark, would he be able to arrest their course? Did he understand the message, the order given him? Would he, bounding forward in advance of the sledge, discover for himself the danger that lay ahead, and come back and warn them?

Should this attempt to stay the sleigh fail, were there no other means available?

Then an idea flashed through the brain of Zita. There remained one chance of staying their career.

Instantly Zita ran to the hut, burst open the door, and, seizing the mattress of Kainie's bed, dragged it forth across the platform, and threw it under the stationary sails of the mill.

Then she went back to the cottage, and, gathering up the red embers of the fire in a shovel, ran with them forth again, and threw them upon the straw mattress.

Next she stood, shovel in hand, waiting the result, watching as the fire burnt its way through the ticking and buried itself in the straw.

For a moment there ensued a red glare—an eating outward of the ticking by fiery teeth—then a ghost-like flame leaped up, and wavered above the incandescent mass. It threw itself

A wondrous sight in the black night.—p. 369.

high into the air, as though it were independent of the fire below, then returned and dipped its feet in the red ashes. With the shovel Zita stirred the ignited mass. Then the mattress broke into flame, and the flame reared itself in many tongues, swayed with the wind, curled over, broke into a multitude of orange fire-flashes that capered and pirouetted about the glowing heart of fire, as though the fabled Salamanders had manifested themselves, and rejoiced in being able to dance in their proper element. In another moment the flames had ignited the sail that hung above them, and were racing each other up the canvas.

Zita sped to the clog. She had learned from Kainie how a windmill was to be set in motion, and how the revolution of the sails was to be arrested, on the first visit she had paid to Red Wings. She now raised the clog, and with a sigh and creak the arms began to turn. As they did so, the sail which was on fire swept from the bed of flames that had kindled it, and was replaced by another. Instantly Zita stopped the revolution, to allow it also to be kindled. In like manner she treated the remaining sails, and when all blazed, she allowed them to spin unhampered in the breeze.

A wondrous sight in the black night! The mill sails whirling in the freezing blast sent forth streamers of flame and a rain of sparks. Every now and then there dropped from them

incandescent tears. They roared as they went round, forming, as they rotated on the axle, a mighty wheel of dazzling light. Zita stood looking up at her work, and for a moment forgot the occasion of the setting fire to the wheel in the overwhelming effect produced by the brilliancy of the spectacle. The wind not only made the canvas glare, but kindled as well the stretchers of lath to which it was fastened, and the mainbeams likewise. The ties by which the sail-cloth was fastened were of tarred cord. As the fire consumed a portion, the rest slipped forth, and flew away in lurid lines of light.

The platform was illumined, as though a blaze of July sun had fallen on it. The window-panes of the cottage were transmuted into flakes of gold-leaf. The dykes reflected the flashing sails, and shot the light along in streaks through the dark fen into the outer darkness beyond.

A number of bats that had been harboured by the old mill, and were sleeping through the winter, were roused by the light, quickened by the heat, and came forth in flights, dazed, to flit on leather wings about the platform, to dart into the wheel of fire, and to fly back scorched, and to fall crippled at Zita's feet.

Wolf came up cowering. He had been unable to trace the course of his mistress on the ice, and he crouched moaning at Zita's feet, his eyes watching the fiery revolutions, but ever and anon starting back with a snap and a whine

as some disabled bat clawed at him, and endeavoured to scramble up his side.

Would the whole mill fall a prey to the flames?

Ignited, molten tar was flung off as fire dross by the whirling sails, masses of burning canvas were carried off on the wind. The sails for a while moved more slowly. The canvas was in part consumed, but the flame itself seemed to form a sheet over the ribs, and incite the wind to act with redoubled force; for again, with renewed activity, the great arms continued their rotation.

Every rush in the dyke was made visible, standing out as a rod of burnished gold, and the withered tassels of seed glowed scarlet, against a background of night made doubly sombre by the dazzling splendour of the burning mill sails.

The boarded and tarred body of the mill was changed in the lurid glare into a structure of red copper. In the heat given off by the wings, the tar dissolved and ran down from the movable cap, as though the great bulk of the mill were sweating in an agony of fear lest the fire should reach and consume it also.

A barn-owl hovered aloft, and the glare smote on its white breast and under-wings. It to-whooed in its terror, and its cry could be heard above the rush of the sails and the roar of the flames.

There were other sounds that combined with

the hooting of the owl, the rush of the sails and of the fire. The mechanism of the mill was in motion; the huge axle revolved and throbbed like a great pulse running through the body of the structure, the wheels creaked and groaned, the paddles laboured to drive the water up the incline, and the water when it came produced strange sounds beneath the ice, gasps and gulps. It was as though the dykes were sobbing at the combustion and destruction of the engine which had so long and so steadily laboured to drain them.

When the fire reached iron and copper nails and bands, and heated the metals to white heat, they became incandescent, and gave forth streams of green and blue flame, that glowed with the marigold yellow and tiger-lily red of the blazing wood and tar, forming of the fiery circle a rainbow complete in its prismatic tints. The clouds that passed overhead were flushed and palpitated, reflecting the fire below.

Notwithstanding the anguish of mind that possessed Zita, her anxiety for the fate of Mark and Kainie, and her self-reproach, she was carried away, out of all such thoughts, by the transcendent splendour of the spectacle. She stood looking up at the wheel of light, with hands clasped to her bosom, hardly breathing, her face illumined as though she had been looking into the sun.

Then, suddenly, a hand was laid roughly on

her shoulder, and an agitated voice said in her ear, 'Good heavens! what have you done?—wicked, malignant girl!'

Zita dropped on her knees, with a cry of mingled joy and pain.

'Thank God! they are saved!'

She stooped and hid her face in her skirt about her knees. The revulsion of feeling was more than she could bear. She gasped for breath. She came to a full stop in sensation and thought. She could not rise, speak, nor look up. Then relief from acute tension of the mind found itself a way in a flood of tears, and broken words of no meaning and without connection were sobbed forth, and muffled in her gown.

When, finally, she did raise her head, and gather her dazed faculties, and wipe the water from her eyes, she saw that Mark and Kainie were forcing the head of the mill round, so as no longer to present the sails to the wind, but make them face away from it, so as to lessen the danger to the body of the mill, which might at any moment ignite when flame and sparks were swept over it.

They then put on the clog and stopped the movement of the charred arms.

This was almost all that could be done. They trusted that the arms would burn themselves out without the axle catching fire.

'Kainie,' said Mark, 'I'll run a rope up and

throw it over the axle, and you can pass me up buckets of water.'

Then he came to where Zita knelt. Kainie was at his side.

'You infamous creature!' said Kainie. 'Why did you do it?'

'To save you and Mark.'

'To save us? That is a fine story.'

'They had let out the water, and the ice is broken up.'

'Let out what water?' asked Mark.

'The water of the river.'

'Who have done this?'

'Why, Pip and some other men.'

'Zita,' said Mark, 'what do you mean? Is there any truth in this?'

'It is true, indeed,' she answered. 'They have done it to revenge themselves on Mr. Drownlands, because he gave evidence against some of their comrades.'

'This is very serious,' said Mark.

'It is quite true. They would not allow me to go back to Prickwillow. I tried, but they stopped me, and forced me to come on this way. I could not warn the master. And they told me to keep off the ice. As I came along, I heard it scream and crack, and go down in a mass together.'

'Why did you not tell me this before?'

'You would not listen to me. You said cruel things of me, and Kainie struck me in the face.'

'And why did you set the mill on fire?'

'To force you to come back. I did not care about your danger till too late. I ran after you, you could not hear me. I knew that if you saw fire at the mill you would return. Nothing but that could bring you back.'

Mark was silent for a moment. Then, with emotion in his voice, he said—

'Zita, I believe we have wronged you grievously.'

'No,' answered the girl, 'it was I who wronged you. I let you go, and said, Go under the ice and be drowned, I did not care.'

'I did not hear you.'

'I said it—instead of telling you of your danger. I was angry—very angry, and I was hurt by Kainie—but'— she hesitated, her voice faltered—'at the bottom of all was this—I was jealous.'

'Jealous? Jealous of whom?'

'Mark, you had been so kind to me. I had been so happy with you. I even thought you liked me. Then you turned away from me for Kainie.'

'For Kainie?'

There was surprise in his face.

'Yes, you like her best. You are right—she is good, and I am bad—but it made me jealous.'

'Good heavens! You do not understand. There is now no need for further concealment. Kainie is my sister!'

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE BRENT-GEESE.

IT was even as Mark said, but the particulars relative to Kerenhappuch did not come to the knowledge of Zita till some time later.

Jake Runham, the father of Mark, had made the acquaintance of Drownlands' sister, and had betrayed her. Instead of marrying her, he suddenly took a woman who was an heiress, married her for her money, and left Leah Drownlands to her shame.

The secret of Leah's disgrace was well kept. She was sent away to a distance, and when she returned after five years with a child, she would say nothing relative to the parentage of Kainie, nor did her brother proclaim it. Ki never forgave his sister, and would never hold communication with her or receive her child. Jake Runham naturally enough was reserved on the matter, and no one suspected who the father of Kainie was. The public believed that, to use their own terms, Leah had 'met with a misfortune' whilst away from the Fens.

On her return to the neighbourhood of Prickwillow, the unfortunate woman obtained from the Commissioners the use of the cottage and a small allowance, on consideration of her attending to the mill. This pittance she eked out with needlework. Mark had entertained no suspicion of the relationship so long as his father lived, but on his death there was that provision made in the will which revealed the long-hidden secret. Jake acknowledged his paternity to Kainie, and solemnly required his son to provide for and watch over his half-sister. It seemed probable that he had in the past secretly contributed something towards the maintenance of Leah Drownlands and her daughter.

These facts were not as yet generally known, but now that Kainie was to be removed to Crumbland, it was inevitable that they should be made public.

The reason why Mark was so resolved to take Kainie away from Red Wings was that she was harbouring and screening Ephraim Beamish, to whom she was attached and engaged. Mark saw that this could not be suffered to continue. He urged the case with his mother, who had strenuously opposed the reception of the girl into the farm, but who now, as a good woman, yielded when she considered the gravity of the circumstances.

Ever since the death of Jake Runham, Kerenhappuch had known the truth. It had been

necessary for Mark to tell her of their relationship, and of the obligation that had been laid upon him. At the same time, to save his father's memory, he urged her to keep the matter secret. This it was which made her reticent with Zita.

'Come,' said Mark. 'Now is not the time for an explanation—nor can I speak of such matters to you without pain, for my father did a great wrong. The question at this moment is—What is to be done? Here is the mill running a risk of being burnt down; on the other hand, there is the water which has been let out, pouring over the Fens. The latter is the most serious concern. If the mill be consumed, it can be rebuilt speedily; but if the fen be flooded, it will take years before it recovers.'

He took Zita's hand in his.

'I do believe I have been unjust. So has Kainie. We owe our lives to you. Kainie, ask her to forgive you the blow you dealt her.'

'No,' said Zita. 'I struck Kainie first, and she gave me the blow back again—harder than I struck her, but that was her profits.'

It seemed probable that the fire smouldering in the ribs of the sails would become extinct. There were matters more urgent, calling Mark elsewhere.

'Pip knew better than advise me of his intent,' said Mark. 'We must have a light.'

He tore one of the stakes from the sails of the mill.

'It will serve as a torch,' said he. 'Run, Kainie, to the bridge, give the alarm to the bankers there. Tell them to bring tools and all needful down the embankment.'

'But they must not take Pip.'

'Pip will have sheered off long before they reach the place. Run, Kainie. Come on, Zita, and show me where the bank has been cut through.'

They walked on together, and their shadows were cast before them by the still glowing mill, which now and then shot up into flame, and then became a smouldering mass.

They walked fast, but not very fast; that was hardly possible on the bank.

For a while Mark said nothing, but he put out his hand, and took that of Zita.

'There has been great misunderstanding,' he said meditatively.

'Yes,' she replied, 'indeed there has. I was jealous because I thought you liked Kainie best.'

'And I—I do not know what I thought; evil things were said, and I was a fool, a cursed fool, to believe them. So—you were jealous?'

'Yes, Mark.'

'You could not have been jealous if you had not cared for me.'

She did not answer.

'And I believe the reason why I gave ear to evil words was because I loved you—loved you

so dearly that I was jealous through every thread of my being. I was jealous of that fellow Drownlands. I was an ass to think those things could be possible that were said of you. I ought to have known you better.'

'Yes, Mark, you ought to have known me better.'

'But it is not now too late. Zita, we will be to each other as we were before—that is, if you can forgive me.'

'Indeed I can forgive you.'

'And I will let all know that we understand each other. And, Zita,' he laughed, 'we'll have the old van and Dobbin'—

'He is Jewel, not Dobbin.'

'And Jewel, brought over to Crumbland.'

'That cannot be, Mark, now.'

'Why not?'

'It is too late.'

'How too late?'

'I have promised Drownlands to remain with him at Prickwillow, and take care of his house as long as he lives.'

'That won't hold. If I make you my wife'—

'That cannot be.'

'Cannot be?—it shall be.'

'No, Mark, I gave you up. I gave up my thoughts of you as a husband in order to get Ki Drownlands to desist from appearing against you in court.'

'He could have done nothing.'

'Whether he could or could not, matters nought now. I made a promise.'

'You must break it.'

She shook her head.

'A deal is a deal.'

Then, as both remained silent, suddenly strange sounds were heard high up in the dark sky, a sound as of barking dogs in full career.

Zita shivered and caught hold of Mark.

'Oh!' she said in a whisper, full of fear. 'They scent a soul—they hunt a soul! Oh, poor soul! God help it! Poor soul—run—run—swift—in at heaven's door!'

'Nonsense, little frightened creature! It is the brent-geese!'

'Mark, last time I heard them it betokened death. Then it was two souls—two flying—flying—and the dogs in full career after them.'

'You, Zita,' laughed Mark, 'do you remember when we spoke of this on the ice, I said when next you heard the brent-geese I hoped I might stand by you. Zita, please God, when the hell-hounds, if such they be,—and I don't believe a word of it,—be let loose, scenting my soul or yours, that I may be by you, or you by me, to cheer each other in the final and dreadful race.'

Zita shuddered.

'Mark, it may not be. I shall stand by Drownlands. I have promised—a deal is a deal.'

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE CUT EMBANKMENT.

DROWNLANDS had been for some time in the upstairs room that served as his office. He had brought out his account-books, lighted his lamp, and was endeavouring to engage his thoughts on his expenditure in wages, and to go over the names of his workmen, and strike out such as had taken part in the recent riot. But it was in vain. After a few futile attempts, he leaned his head on his palm, and gave himself over to thoughts of Zita.

It was poor comfort to him to know that she would remain in his house, but it was a comfort. He felt confidence in her—that, having passed her word to remain, remain she would, whatever might happen. Whatever animadversions might be made on her presence in his house, however deeply her reputation might suffer, she would stay with him. She had passed her word. It was not unlikely, he thought, that some swain might become enamoured of her, and ask her to

join her lot with his, but she would refuse him. She would remain an old maid at Prickwillow, because she had passed her word. Not for a moment did Drownlands' faith in Zita give way. She had impressed the man indelibly with a conviction of her sincerity. Zita as a Cheap Jack was one thing, Zita in private life was another. She had one conscience for her dealings with the general public, another conscience for her dealings with individuals face to face. The sun might rise in the west and go down in the Orient sky, but Zita could not fail to keep her word.

Drownlands was startled from his reverie by the maid Sarah, who rushed in at the door, exclaiming—

'Master, the water be out!'

'What water?'

'The boy says the fen is flooded.'

'Flooded?'

'He says the bank be broke.'

'The Lark embankment?'

Drownlands realised instantly the significance of the announcement.

'Quick!' said he; 'light me the lantern. Sharp! No time is to be lost.'

He ran to the corner to snatch up a stick, and, without observing what he did, laid hold of the flail. He did not perceive his mistake till he had reached the foot of the staircase. Then he could not delay to return and exchange it for a

staff. He caught the lantern from the hand of Sarah and went out into the yard. His feet at once splashed into water.

'What has happened?' he exclaimed, with an oath. 'It cannot be that they have cut the embankment.'

He splashed on. Over the frozen surface of the soil a ripple of water was running, followed by another ripple, and with each the film of water covering the yard was sensibly deepened.

'The bank must have broken. The frost has done it. They would never have dared to cut it.'

Swaying his lantern, Drownlands strode through the water, out of the stackyard and into the drove that led from his farm to the highway. This had been much cut up that day by his waggons carting roots. The heavy vehicles with broad wheels had crushed through the icy crust, and the hoofs of the horses had assisted in breaking up the frost case. Thus in places the water was able to act on the unfrozen peat, and undermine the surface that was hard frozen. The peat was dry, and when the water reached it, it swelled as a sponge.

A tide was flowing down the drove. On both sides were the frozen dykes; the water covered the ice, running along it, and but for the sedge and rushes that rose out of the ditches, their presence would have been undefined.

The brow of Drownlands darkened, and his

cheeks glowed. Was this the meaning of the threats launched against him? He had never conceived it possible that the men would have recourse to such means as this to pay off their grudge against him, for to inundate the farm was to destroy their field of labour.

'I wish I had brought my gun,' said he. 'And then, should I see one of the scoundrels, I'd shoot him with no more scruple than I would a dotterel. As it is, let me come upon one,'—he raised and flourished his flail,—'and I will beat out his brains.'

Drownlands walked with difficulty. Where the surface under the water was frozen, there it was slippery. Where it was broken through and broken up by the wain wheels and horse hoofs, there it was slough.

Ruts, still frozen, were in places two or three feet in depth, and they were filled. Invisible under the water, he was liable to sink into them. He stumbled along, angry, swearing, advancing with labour, forced to hold his lantern, first to one side, then to the other, to make sure that he was not turning from his road, his sole guide being the sedge lines, one on each side.

The roads in the Fens are not made of stone, for stone is not to be found in the Fens. The soil hardens with drought and frost. In rainy weather it is a slough. The draining-machines, being almost constantly at work, suck all the moisture out of the soil, and as it dries it

shrinks. Now that the water from the canal was overflowing the fen, it rippled on innocuously over the icy case, but wherever it could penetrate through that case, at every crack, at every dint, it was drunk in in heavy draughts by the thirsty soil, that immediately heaved and swelled as it imbibed the moisture, and in so doing dissolved into slough.

The tide continued to flow. In the yard the water had been hardly as high as the instep. It now flowed over the boot tops.

The water was intensely cold.

Drownlands had on his boots, such as he wore ordinarily, but not his wading boots that reached to the thighs. He had not thought it necessary to wear such protectors in frosty weather. Those he wore did not extend higher than his calves. Already, in one of his plunges into a rut filled with water, he had soaked his feet, his boots, so far from serving as a protection, being an encumbrance. The flail, moreover, was of small service; the handfast was not of length sufficient for him to probe the water before him and sound his way. Would that he had drawn on his wading-boots—would that he had brought a leaping-pole!

Drownlands turned his head over his shoulder and looked back at the house. He could see the light from the kitchen and that from his office —the latter partially, as, owing to the broken glass in the window, he had closed the shutters.

He had left his lamp burning, and he could distinguish its light in a line where the shutters closed imperfectly.

It seemed to the man that the distance he had come was greater than it really was.

The difficulty of advancing must increase with every few minutes. In a quarter of an hour it would not be possible to traverse the distance between Prickwillow and the embankment save by boat.

He must reach the tow-path, and hasten along it to the nearest station, where a gang of workmen was quartered, with implements and material ready on an emergency.

There was no time to be lost. Every minute was of importance. Drownlands knew but too well that if his farm were inundated, it would be rendered valueless for several years. It would not be utter ruin, as he had the savings of the past to eat into, but it would prevent his reaping advantage from his land till it had been completely recovered of the effects of the flood.

Struggling with the rising tide, he succeeded in getting upon the highway. But now his difficulties were the greater, for he had entered into the current that poured from the Lark. The water rushed over his knees. The cold was almost insupportable. With body bent, step by step, helping himself onwards with the flail, but unable always to trust it, owing to the pits in the submerged surface, he advanced slowly.

He held up the lantern and looked round. The tallow candle through the horn sides but feebly illumined the night. It showed the gurgling water in which he was wading, but it showed nothing beside. He did not any longer know his direction. He must stem the current, but was unable to judge where the edge and where the centre of the current were that poured against him.

When he lowered his lantern, he was aware of a lurid light in the sky above the embankment, and saw now and then a brilliant spark thrown up. That there was a fire somewhere he could not doubt, and concluded that the rioters who had cut the embankment were continuing their incendiary work as before. He could not see the wheel of fire; he was too low down for that, but he saw the illumination caused by it. Suddenly his feet gave way, and he fell in the water. He had gone into one of the deepest cart-ruts. As he fell, his lantern was extinguished.

It was now impossible for him to return. He could not, if he wished it, have retraced his steps. His only possible course was to scramble up the bank, and to do this he now devoted all his energies. But unhappily he had reached precisely that point where the bank had been cut through, and was therefore exposed to the full force of the outrush of the river. As, by a desperate effort, he recovered his feet, he could see the lip of water curling over, reddened by

the reflection of the fire beyond. He was drenched in the ice-cold water, but that was nothing to the anguish in his feet; they were turning dead, numbed by the water in which they had been immersed so long without proper protection.

But this was not all. No sooner had Drownlands reached the slope of the embankment than he became aware that the little assistance rendered him by the frost was at an end. The rush of water had broken up the gault of which the bank was formed, was eating at every moment farther into it, and widening the mouth by which it poured from the bed of the river upon the low reclaimed land. The moistened marl was greasy under his feet. When he slipped and endeavoured to catch at the bank, his hands sank into the sodden clay, and the tenacious matter held his fingers like glue. His feet, moreover, went deep into the clay, and to extract them was difficult.

It became apparent to Drownlands that he must battle for his life against the current.

He endeavoured to assist himself in his ascent by the staff of the flail, but this proved of no help to him, as it sank with the pressure applied to it in the glutinous mass. He strove to heave himself up, and could not; his feet, dead with cold, and, through their loss of sensation, no longer able to feel the bottom, slipped from under him. He could not extract his staff from the

marl. All he was able to do was to cling to it, and pant and recover breath, and then make another desperate effort forward.

The water, tearing through the fissure in the bank, broke off masses of the clay, half frozen, and whirled them down, and along with them blocks of river ice that had broken up. It was sometimes difficult to ascend the embankment, the slope of which was steep, in the face of a strong wind; it was a hundred times more difficult now, when it had to be done against a rushing torrent, and that of water which curdled the blood in the veins, knotted the muscles with cramp, and paralysed the sinews.

No thought of revenge on those who had cut the bank now occupied the mind of Drownlands —no thought of having the leak stopped. The one absorbing consideration was how to escape from the deadly-cold raging current.

Then a sharp cant of ice whirled down, cut his knuckles and jarred his fingers, so that he let go the flail with one hand, but seized it in time with the other to save himself from being swept away. He was carried off his feet, and in trying to right himself drove one foot so deeply into the marl, that, when he endeavoured to pluck it forth, the tenacious matter held his boot and tore it off his foot. The intensity of the cold was, however, so great, that he was not sensible of the loss. He looked up. The red auroral light was still illumining the sky behind

the bank. He held to the flail that was planted in the clay. If that gave way, his hold on life would be gone.

Now he saw above him a dark figure on the bank, and he cried, 'Help! help!'

'Who calls there?'

'It is I—Ki Drownlands.'

The man made no effort to descend. He folded his arms, and said slowly in harsh tones—

'I cannot help you. I am Ephraim Beamish. You are prepared to testify against some twenty of my comrades, and to send them to the gallows. Which is of most worth, your life, you Judas, or theirs?'

'Help! I will say nothing.'

'I cannot trust you,' said Beamish. 'Wretched man, water was created of God to cleanse away transgression. Go, wash thee and be clean—wash thee and be free from thy sins.'

Then a torch flared above the bank. Mark was there with Zita.

'Who is there? What is this?' Mark asked, with an agitated voice. The blazing tarred wood, sending up a golden burst of flame, illumined the upturned countenance of Drownlands. The struggling man raised his arm to wipe the water and sweat from his eyes and screen them from the brilliant light.

'It is the master,' said Zita. 'Save him, Mark! Oh, do save him!'

Instantly, but with caution, Mark descended,

digging his heels deep into the marl at each step, and held the torch aloft, wavering, guttering, throwing out sparks in the wind. 'Give me your hand,' said the young man.

The exhausted, desperate Drownlands withdrew his arm from before his eyes.

In the burning wood was a copper nail, and this now sent forth a lambent, grass-green flame, in the light of which Drownlands' face was like that of a corpse. The man, in his extreme peril and desire for help, stretched forth his hand.

Then the wind blew the flame so that the face of Mark was illumined. Suddenly Tiger Ki snatched his hand back again.

'A Runham—no!'

He endeavoured by a frantic effort to ascend the bank by his own efforts. There ensued a terrible scene—the struggle of a well-nigh spent man with the adverse elements to deliver himself from his position. He fought with the water and the clay, tossing a spray about him, pounding with his feet, one shod, the other bare, churning clay and water around him.

Failing to mount one step above where the flail was rooted, he discontinued his profitless effort, and, clinging with both hands to the stay, cried—

'Zita, I will owe life to you, or to none!'

Without a thought for herself, the girl leaped to his aid.

In a moment his disengaged arm was round her.

'We may die—if we cannot live—together.'

'Let go!' shouted Mark, and laid hold of Zita by the arm. 'Let go!'

'To you—never!'

Without consideration Mark drove the burning torch against his hand that clasped the girl.

With a shriek Drownlands relaxed his hold.

At that moment, Ephraim, who had descended carefully, had laid hold of the flail above where Drownlands' hand had clutched it. He stooped, and, exerting his full force from above, drew it forth from the clay in which it was fast.

At once Drownlands slid away in the stream. Still clinging to the flail, he was carried off his feet, out of the range of light cast by the torch, and under water.

'Go!' said Beamish, waving his hand over the torrent. 'Go! thou accuser of thy brethren! Go, wash away thy sins in the water that drowns thee!'

He saw the flood before him glittering like gold. He looked round. The gangers had come—summoned by Kainie.

'Save him! save him!' cried Zita.

'Where is he?—who can say? Carried forth into the outer darkness; rolled away in the baptismal flood—who can say whither?' answered Ephraim.

'No,' said one of the gangers. 'No help is possible.'

'God have mercy on a sinful soul!' said Ephraim.

CHAPTER XL.

THISTLES.

THE trial of the rioters came on before a Special Commission, that sat a few weeks after the arrest of the men. The cutting of the embankment after the arrest had greatly exasperated minds against the unfortunate men who were to take their trial, although they themselves were guiltless in this matter. It probably served to sharpen the sentences pronounced upon them, as their judges shared the general feeling that an example should be made that would overawe the fen-men, and deter them from future acts of lawlessness.

Judgment of death was passed on thirty-four men, but only five were actually executed. The sentence on nine was mitigated into transportation for life, and that on the rest was commuted to imprisonment for a term of years.

Ephraim Beamish was not taken. Mark succeeded in effecting his escape from the Fens. He supplied him with money, and Beamish

took ship at Liverpool for the United States, where he bought a farm, then turned backwoods Baptist preacher, tired of that, returned to farm life, and married Kainie, who went out to him. She was a rich woman, and might have had her pick of the young fen-farmers. She had inherited everything that had belonged to her uncle. But Kainie would have no one save Pip, and as Pip could not come to her, she sold Prickwillow to Mark, and went out to the man of her choice in the New World.

Mark gave his half-sister a fair price for the farm. The land had been seriously injured by the inundation, and would have been more seriously affected had not the bankers, summoned by Kainie, been able rapidly and effectually to stop the breach.

Mark was now a man of substance. When he purchased Prickwillow, he united that estate to Crumbland, and became one of the largest landed proprietors in that portion of the Fens; nevertheless, like his fellow-yeomen, he did not affect to be a squire, but lived in sober fashion, worked with his men, and worked harder than any one of them. A popular man he was with the labourer as with the farmer, for he was just and kindly, and possessed unflagging good spirits. He amassed money. Let his sons or grandsons style themselves gentlemen, said he; for his part, he was content to be plain Mark Runham, farmer.

What is to be told concerning Zita?

The ill opinion formed of her had been due mainly to the malicious and slanderous tongue of Leehanna Tunkiss. Whatever had been said against Zita was traceable to this source.

When it was discovered that Ki Drownlands had made and executed his will on the very day on which he died, and that in it he had constituted his niece sole heiress of all he possessed, and had not even mentioned the Cheap Jack girl, the trust of the fen-folk in the word of Mrs. Tunkiss failed. The housekeeper was discredited and her stories disbelieved.

It was not long before Mark Runham made Zita his wife, and the van, with all its goods, was moved by a team of his horses to Crumbland.

There was one secret Zita retained locked in her heart, and which she never revealed to Mark —the events of the night when Ki Drownlands and Jake Runham met on the embankment and fought with the flails till Mark's father was cast into the canal—there to perish. There was no necessity for her to tell it. The guilty man had died as had his foe—in the same water.

For many years recourse was had to the stores of the van whenever the household was in need of some article there in stock.

In the Fens, when a man requires to traverse a considerable distance, he provides himself with a leaping-pole, and makes for his destination in

a bee-line, clearing every watery obstruction in his way.

The author now uses this privilege—takes pole in hand, and, seeing the end before him, makes for it. What does he first see after having put down the pole and leaped?

A van. Surely the familiar Cheap Jack conveyance, crawling along the drove on a summer's day, drawn by an old horse that takes a few steps, then pauses, breathes hard, looks behind him with a peculiarly resolute expression in his eye, and ignores absolutely every appeal, entreaty, objurgation addressed to him, till he has recovered his wind, when he goes on once more.

From within the van issue cheery children's voices. Then some little heads appear, some with auburn hair and brown eyes, others very fair, and with eyes the colour of the sky.

'What the dickens is that there concern?' asks a stranger, standing on the tow-path by the Lark, who from his vantage-ground watches the slow and intermittent progress of the van on the drove.

'Lor' bless you!' answers a ganger going by. 'It's only them little Cheap Jackies taking a drive.'

Again. What is the meaning of the noise that issues from the coach-house? A shrill voice is haranguing, then is broken in on by a clamour of other voices.

Let us look within.

The van is there, in a house so boxed in as to be inaccessible to poultry.

The front of the van is down. The red velvet curtains, much faded, and the gold fringe, much tarnished, are suspended in their proper places, decorating the front. One boy is on the platform, and is exhibiting his toys to his brothers and sisters, and offering them for sale at extravagant prices; then, abating his demands, he assures them that he offers these articles for absolutely the last time, and at the lowest price which he will consent to receive.

Mark Runham returns from the farm.

'Zita,' says he, 'I want to see my little ones. Where are they?'

'At their favourite amusement on a rainy day.'

'What is that?'

'Playing at being Cheap Jacks. Mark, it is in their blood.'

'Who is doing the selling to-day?'

'Our eldest—James,' answers Zita; 'and, Mark, when James marries, we'll have out that there epergne for the wedding breakfast.'

'That's a long way ahead,' answers Mark.

So it seemed to him. But again the novelist uses his privilege, puts down the pole, and away he goes with one great bound over a period of several years, and finds himself suddenly alight in the parlour of Crumbland. He sees before him Mark, now a middle-aged man, broad in

shoulders and in beam, with ruddy cheeks that are pretty full; and Zita, now a comely matron.

Facing his father and mother, with some shyness in his face, stands Jim, the hope of the family, twirling his hat, and looking furtively in his father's face, as he says—

'Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me, and let me go.'

'Go? Go, Jim? Good gracious! what do you mean? Whither do you want to go?'

'That is just it; nowhere in particular, and yet somewhere.'

'But—leave home?'

'Yes, father, I want to be off and about.'

'Why, Jim, this is sheer delirium—tremenjous, as your mother would say. There is Prickwillow empty, waiting for you, whenever you marry.'

'And the epergne for the breakfast-table,' added Zita.

'I do not want to marry, father! The epergne must wait, mother dear! I haven't found the right one yet,' answered James, hanging his head.

'But, good gracious! why should you go? Have not I been kind to you? Have not you been allowed your own way in all that is right?'

'Never was there a better father,' answered the young man, with emotion, 'and never, never

a dearer, better mother! It is not that. I love home. I love my parents and my brothers and sisters. I dote on the baby. I love the Fens. I cannot believe that any other portion of God's world can be worth living in. I am sure none will be more beautiful in my eyes than the fens of Ely. Nevertheless, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me, and let me go.'

'But for what do you want to be off?'

'Why, father, mother,' says the young man, 'I want to be a Cheap Jack. Ever since I was a child I have loved to drive bargains.'

'Let him go,' says Zita. 'There are some things we have never found a use for here. There's that box of scents; there's the garden syringe. It is a sad pity so much capital should lie idle.'

'Father,' says the young man, 'I feel as though I must go. I do not say I shall be a Cheap Jack all my days.'

'Why, I had such grand views for you, Jim; I thought I would send you to college, and I hoped some day you might even try and get into Parliament.'

'Mark,'—it is Zita who speaks,—'I was a rambling girl once, a sort of a vagabond, going over the country selling my goods; but I have become stationary, like the van, stuck in the fen peat. I have not stirred for many a year, and have never desired to rove out of the Fens any more. It will be the same with Jim. He has

it in his bones. It will do him an amazing lot of good. He'll get to know the General Public.'

'That is it, father,' says James. 'I seems as if I never could be happy and easy in my mind till I've done a stroke of business with that there Public. And I sees my way to it. There's abundance of thistles growing about the edges of the drains. I wants to cut 'em down.'

'Well, cut 'em. That need not take you away.'

'Father, I wants to make the General Public eat 'em, and pay for the privilege. I've heard in my sleep a voice in my ear that I do believe comes from the General Public, saying, "Jim! Jim! give us thistles!" And the wind always whistles to the same tune. And the thunder rolling seems to be the voice of the General Public, braying, "Give us thistles!" And, father, even the very bees when they hum about the flowers seem to convey to me in a whisper the message, as from a lover, but it comes from the General Public, "Give us thistles. We are sick for thistledown. 'Tisn't bread we wants—'tisn't meat—'tis thistledown." I can't say exactly how I'll dispose of it to them,—whether rolled up in pills, or stuffed in feather beds,—but I know the Public will buy thistles in any disguise. And then, father, think of the profits.'

'Mark,' said Zita, 'let him go. Cheap-jacking is an edication. It teaches a chap to know the

General Public, what to lay on his back, how to tickle his ears, what you can make him swallow. If you think of making Jim a mimber of Parliament, there is no school, no college more suitable than the Cheap Jack's van. Let him go, Mark. He's a good boy—he'll come to no harm. He'll settle down the be.ter after it, and he'll enjoy himself—"tremenjous."'

THE END.